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**THE SCANDAL OF PARTICULARITY**

A Historical Survey of the Christian Theology of Religion

by

The Revd J B Sherrington BA BD Cert Ed

submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy

in the Faculty of Arts (Religious Studies)

at the Open University

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE SCANDAL OF PARTICULARITY**

*A Historical Survey of the Christian Theology of Religion*

by

*The Revd J B Sherrington BA BD Cert Ed*

The purpose of this study is to trace the history of Christian thinking about other faiths.

It begins with the Old Testament, in which the dominant theological motif is found to be that of Covenant, which puts Israel in a particular relationship with God, and leaves others outside. This attitude is carried over into the New Testament and on into the early Christian tradition. The exceptions to this are Justin Martyr and the Apologists, who emphasized that the divine light shines for all and in all.

This positive strand in Christian theology then disappeared underground for about a thousand years. The reasons for this lie in the biblical material and in the fact that Christian theologians did not have to think much about other faiths.

In the nineteenth century all that changed because missionaries came up against the reality of other faiths and had to say something about them. It was in the nineteenth century, therefore, that the search for a positive Christian theology of religion began in earnest.

In our time the need to find a solution to this theological problem has become even more urgent as men and women of all faiths meet each other and face many of the same problems in coming to terms with the process of secularisation.

In the last twenty five years, therefore, positive theologies of religion have come from the Roman Catholic tradition, from the Liberal Protestant wing of the Church, and from the World Council of Churches.

Despite that, three things are still needed for a satisfactory theology of other faiths. They are, a recovery of the Philosophy of Religion, a revised Doctrine of Revelation and a re-examination of the concept of 'religion' in Christian thinking.

## INTRODUCTION:

### TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

A theology of religion has been, at best, a submerged theme in the Christian tradition. The reasons for this will be revealed as many and various, but chief among them has to be what might be called a Christian indifference to other faiths. For centuries, Christian theologians saw no need and felt no compulsion to take note of the other faiths in the world. This indifference probably reached its height in 1860 at the first representative missionary conference of modern times, held in Liverpool. Stephen Neill tells us that the reports of this conference have a curiously modern ring. Many of the issues and concerns under discussion are exactly the same as those now debated by the World Council of Churches. But, there is one notable difference, in that hardly one word was said about the non-Christian religions, which the missionaries had to face in their daily work. It was as if these other faiths did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

The situation is now totally different. It is now impossible for Christian theology to proceed as if there were no other religious believers in the world. Since 1860 there has been an explosion of knowledge about other religions and now, in the United Kingdom, representatives of most of the major traditions are to be found, especially in the cities.

The authors of Faith in the City, writing about these adherents of other faiths, note that they raise not only social problems, about which there has been much comment, but also theological problems, about which there has been very little comment:

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1. Cf S Neill, The Christian Faith and Other Faiths, Oxford University Press, 1970, p 1

".... the presence of adherents of other faiths .... in this country has presented the members of the Christian churches with theological problems which they have not yet been able to resolve."<sup>2</sup>

They go on to list some of these theological problems: Does the truth of the Christian Gospel exclude all other truths? Are all religions simply aspects of the one truth? Can we journey together in a quest for truth? Can we worship together? But, beneath all of these important questions there lies the even deeper one about the nature of religion itself. What is religion and what account can Christian theology give of other religions?

### 1. The Problem of Religion

One of the obvious places in which to begin a search for a theology of religion is in the area of definition - that is, what do we mean by 'religion'? But once we begin this exercise we soon discover that the scholars are all agreed on one thing, and that is the difficulty of definition.

Stephen Neill again writes:

"If we speak of 'religion', we imply at once that there is some general concept 'religion' under which all particular forms of religion may be subsumed. But, in fact, every attempt to arrive at

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2. Cf Faith in the City, Church House Publishing, London, 1985, p 60

a satisfactory and agreed definition has proved fruitless."<sup>3</sup>

A comment in a dictionary of religions makes the same point, but more succinctly. It says:

"no simple or single definition will suffice"

and

"dictionary definitions are often circular, prejudiced or so general as to be useless."<sup>4</sup>

So, here we have a paradox. Most of us think that we know what we mean when we talk about religion. It is believing in God, or leading a good life. It often begins with some sort of profound experience and leads into worship and prayer. It affects the way that lives are lived and raises questions about the nature of morality. More technically, it is:

"an attitude of awe towards God or gods or the supernatural, or the mystery of life, accompanied by beliefs and basic patterns of individual group behaviour."<sup>5</sup>

This religious attitude is so recognisable that it can be identified even across cultural boundaries. For example, David Hay tells us that when Cortes and his Conquistadors landed on the shores of Mexico in 1579 they immediately identified Indian religious activity as religion. It was foreign and it was distasteful, but it was

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3. S Neill Op Cit p 3

4. John Hinnells (Ed) The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, Penguin Books, 1984, article on 'Religion'

5. Cf Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass (ed) The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, Fontana, London, 1877, 'Religion'

recognisable as religion. Likewise, the Indians recognised the Spanish celebration of the Mass also as a religious activity.

It is apparent, then, that there is something universal about religion. In one form or another it seems to have been practised by all humankind, in all societies and in every age. But the paradox is that this universal phenomenon cannot be defined, despite valiant efforts by scholars to produce such a definition. More than fifty years ago, the psychologist Leuba assembled a list of forty eight definitions, arrived at by forty eight different authors. Since then, of course, as volumes of religious writings have poured off the presses, the number of definitions has multiplied enormously.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this multitude of unsatisfactory definitions, and despite the strictures of The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, some still look to an analysis of the word 'religion' as the route to its meaning. Thus, some follow Cicero, who thought that the word came from the Latin root 'relegere', meaning 'to re-read' or 'to ponder'. According to this line of thought, religion has to do with reading and pondering the signs of divine activity. But others have followed Lactantius - "the Christian Cicero" - who held that the word came from the root 'religare', meaning 'to bind back'. This derivation, if true, suggests that religion has something to do with the bond between man and the divine. The truth is that, whatever its root, the origin of the word appears to be lost. It is worth reminding ourselves also, that most ancient peoples had no word for what we now call 'religion'. For those of us in the West, it is noteworthy that

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6. Cf David Hay, Exploring Inner Space, Penguin, London, 1982, pp 15-19



this is especially true of the Semitic peoples. Thus, an article in A Dictionary of Christian Theology tells us that the word 'religion' does not occur in the Bible, except perhaps in James 1,27, and this has an obviously negative effect on any Christian theology of religion.<sup>7</sup>

In his Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902, later published as The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James makes reference to Leuba's list of definitions and also urges that pursuit of a single and simple definition is futile. Nevertheless, he makes his own attempt:

"Religion .... shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider divine."<sup>8</sup>

Two features of this attempt by James have given rise to important developments in the search for a definition of religion. They are (1) the concentration on "feelings, acts and experiences" and (2) the neglect of the question of truth - "whatever they may consider divine". Thus, the question of definition has become analytical and the question of whether all worship the same God has been neglected.

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7. Alan Richardson (Ed), A Dictionary of Christian Theology, SCM, London, 1969, article on 'Religion'

8. William James, Varieties of Religious Experience, Fontana Edition, London 1962, p 16

## 2. Analytical Approaches to Religion

If pursuit of a definition is doomed to failure, it is better to try to describe the elements of religion? Some scholars have thought so. For example, at the beginning of their encyclopaedic study of The Religions of Mankind, two Swedish scholars suggest that there are four "essential elements of religion". They are:

### 1. An Intellectual Element

At the heart of all religious activity there lies a conviction that one or more powers exist which exert control over the destiny of humankind, and maintain the material and spiritual values of which man stands in need.

### 2. An Emotional Element

Religion also has at its heart the feeling that the individual experiences dependence on this (these) power(s) and relationship with the power(s) in various ways.

### 3. A Behavioural Element

Religion is not just an inward conviction and feeling, it also finds outward expression in certain actions. The actions particularly associated with religion are connected with worship, prayer, sacrifices and the fulfilment of ethical demands.

### 4. A Social Element

The convictions, feelings and actions which are essential to religion need some sort of institution to ensure their continuity. A religion without a social element would soon die, since it is within the institution that men work together in order to obtain the values which religion offers.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Ringgren and Strom, Religions of Mankind, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1967, p xvii-xviii

The great strength of this type of analysis lies in the fact that it shows that religion involves the whole of the personality, that it is universal in time and space, and that it can be examined empirically.

Another approach, and similar to it, is that of Ninian Smart, who begins with a slightly different question, that is, "What are the dimensions of religion?" In reply to that question, he suggests that there are six dimensions of religion:

1. The Ritual Dimension

This is concerned with worship and includes yoga and even the simplest form of service.

2. The Mythological Dimension

This is concerned with reporting on what is believed within a religion. It includes the history of a tradition and important events interpreted by the believer.

3. The Doctrinal Dimension

This is also concerned with what is believed, and is not always easily distinguished from the Mythological Dimension. It is most readily associated with the teaching aspect of a tradition.

4. The Ethical Dimension

This is concerned with the teaching about how to behave and with the communal aspect of the faith.

5. The Social Dimension

This dimension is concerned with the recognition that all religions are human institutions with an organised structure.

## 6. The Experimental Dimension

This dimension takes account of the fact that experience is fundamental to religion.<sup>10</sup>

Sociological analyses also provide useful information about the function of religion. For example, Andrew Greeley has suggested that, whatever may be the practice of religion, it actually fulfils five important functions in human life:

1. Religion provides man with a faith or meaning system which enables him to cope with the biggest questions he has to answer - the question of the Ultimate, the question of existence, of life and death, of meaning and purpose.
2. Religion also provides men with a feeling of belonging to a communal group whose members share the same commitment and through that sharing provide strong basic support for each other.
3. Religion strives to integrate with life the profound and disturbing forces of sexuality.
4. Religion offers man a channel of coming into contact with the Powers, a contact that is often mystical and even ecstatic.
5. Religion provides man with certain leaders whose role is to give comfort and challenge when he attempts to wrestle with the Ultimate.<sup>11</sup>

There are some points of contact between all these analytical approaches to the question of "What is Religion?" In particular, they all point to the universality of religious practice and

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10. Ninian Smart, The Religious Experience of Mankind, Fontana Edition, London, 1969, pp 26 and 27

11. Andrew Greeley, The Persistence of Religion, SCM London 1973, p 116

highlight the common features.

So when we study them, we can say with some degree of confidence, that whatever the difficulties of definition, there is such a thing as 'religion'. There is enough to set up a working definition:

"We shall, therefore, at the present, be content to recognise that religions do, in fact, exist and obtain a general and tentative picture of religion by looking for any common features in the several religions - a common feature of outward form rather than inner content. A religion, objectively considered, is (1) a way of thinking about the world, including man himself; (2) a way of behaving; (3) a way of feeling. If we want to use technical language .... we might say that there is an intellectual, moral and experiential element in religion. Or, even more technically, each religion has a creed, a code of ethics and a cult."<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Question of Truth

Gundry has put his finger on both the strength and the weakness of the analytical approach to religion: it concentrates on "the outward form, rather than the inner content". In particular, it avoids the question of truth - the truth of what is claimed by each religious tradition.

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12. D W Gundry, Religions, Macmillan, London, 1958, p 6

In 1979, the German Roman Catholic missiologist Walter Bühlman, produced a book with the title All Have The Same God. His purpose in writing was to review the process of dialogue between the religions over the previous twenty years, through the medium of the numerous inter-religious meetings and conferences. Throughout the book he makes the assumption that God is One and that he makes himself known to all people. Dialogue is therefore not only possible but it is desirable. The attitude is best summed up with these words from the final chapter:

"In conclusion, then, we can say that God has always been in dialogue with all peoples, and still is."<sup>13</sup>

This is also the stance of the World Council of Churches, as expressed in the work of Stanley Samartha. Paul Knitter describes it as "The Relativity of All Revelations", in which Samartha has come to question ideas of absolute finality and universal normativity of Christ. It is a position in which no tradition can claim absolute truth, for:

"Together, religions must seek after truth in order that together they might promote justice."<sup>14</sup>

This is also the attitude of what might be called 'popular theology'. Gerald Priestland gives voice to it in a book based on a series of radio programmes Priestland's Progress. In what he calls 'a purple passage' he writes:

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13. Walter Bühlman, All Have The Same God, St Paul Publications, Stroud, 1979, p 202

14. Cf Paul Knitter, No Other Name?, SCM, London, 1985, pp 157-159

"I see God as a vast mountain with its top  
vanishing in the clouds and its circumference  
disappearing over the horizon. Each of us stands  
in a different position in relation to the mountain,  
each of us gets a somewhat different view of it."<sup>15</sup>

What all these writers have in common is the belief that there is only One God and that this God is known in different ways by different peoples in different cultures. They also make the assumption that no single way to God is final and ultimate. Some are thought to be better than others, but none is to be elevated over all.

In the long history of Christian theology it is hard to find much to support this view. Most Christian theologians would want to say that some ways of describing and responding to God are unworthy, inaccurate and even wrong. And they would say this on the basis of their belief in Jesus Christ as the Incarnation of God. The question of truth for Christian theology is linked with the doctrine of the Incarnation which leads to misunderstanding and confusion.

A good example of this misunderstanding and confusion is to be found in one of the Reports emanating from the World Council of Churches. It is to be found in the chapter "Hindu-Christian Dialogue Postponed" in the volume Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths. This consists of a letter written by a Hindu to a Christian. The writer is Sivendra Prakash and his letter makes some interesting and critical

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15. Gerald Priestland, Priestland's Progress, BBC, London, 1981, p 101

points about the idea of dialogue. Prakash alleges that Christians have usually been against Hindus. They have usually been concerned with conversion, not dialogue. This antipathy has usually been based on appalling ignorance of Hinduism. It is a general fact that Semitic religions, including Christianity, are only interested in making converts from other faiths. Formal and academic dialogue are not the best ways to learn from each other. Christians want nothing more than mere information. Hindus are concerned with Inner Mystery. Christian ideas about dialogue are therefore limited in scope. The main obstacles to dialogue are superiority and fear of losing one's identity, for if we accept the full value of the inner experience of my brother, will not the full value of my own experience be at stake? Christians have minimised Christ by insisting on the unique claims of Jesus:

"When you have discovered the inner Christ in the light of the Spirit within, then we shall gladly come forward to share with you our own experiences of the interiority of God."

The recipient of this letter, C Murray Rogers, responded by admitting that the absolutising of the claims of Jesus, which so upsets and offends Hindus, is intolerably presumptuous on the part of Christians. It is a form of religious imperialism which they rightly refuse unless these claims are seen and known to be beyond every cultural and spiritual 'form'. This 'form' is not, and never will be, the essence of the Christian faith.<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of theology, the interesting feature of this

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16. S J Smartha (Ed), Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths, WCC, Geneva, 1971, pp 21-28



exchange is the way in which, throughout it, the terms 'Jesus' and 'Christ' are used interchangeably and without qualification. Most Christian theologians would want to make a distinction between Jesus (of history) and Christ (of faith). The Christ of Faith may be beyond all 'form'. On the other hand, the only picture we have of Christ is in the 'form' of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Is the Hindu objection, then, to anything other than the claim that the man Jesus of Nazareth was a genuinely historical figure? Is there an 'inner Christ' who can be discovered "in the light of the Spirit", apart from the Jesus who is witnessed in the New Testament?

This exchange illustrates that the doctrine of the Incarnation is a stumbling-block on the road to dialogue and a Christian theology of religion. It also, incidentally, illustrates the importance of theology and a proper understanding of each other by the participants in any dialogue. Spirituality and mysticism are attractive ways of meeting in dialogue, but they are not enough on their own. The question of truth is important, and so is a proper philosophy of religion.

Progress in the search for a Christian theology of religion will only be made, therefore, by reflection on the Christian tradition and development of insights found within it. In the following chapters an attempt is made to do just that.

In Chapter 1, I examine what the Old Testament has to say about the faith of other people and find that the attitudes revealed are ambivalent. In the Doctrine of Creation there are the seeds of a positive and gracious attitude to people of other faiths. But it is the Covenant which is the dominant theme. It is the Doctrines of

Election and Remnant which determine Israel's faith. It is the belief that they are the elected people of God which leads them to say that they are right while all others are wrong. This is "the scandal of particularity" and it has far-reaching effects.

Thus in Chapter 2, I find that the negative attitude towards people of other faiths is carried over into the New Testament. The idea of 'particularity' is now understood as applying to the Christian Church.

Chapter 3 reveals that attempts by Christian theologians to interpret biblical texts are marked by special pleading, arguments from silence and theological prejudice.

It is not surprising, therefore, to discover in Chapter 4 that theologians from the Early Church are similarly confused. One line of thought is found in Justin and the Apologists and develops the Johannine logos-theology. According to this type of theology there is positive merit in the work of so-called 'pagan philosophers'.

This merit is seen as a sort of schoolmaster before Christ. Another line of thought, as exemplified in Tertullian, stresses the uniqueness of Christ and the particularity of Christianity.

In Chapter 5, therefore, I review one thousand years of the Christian theological tradition, and find that a positive attitude to people of other faiths is only a submerged theme. The reasons for this indifference emerge as lack of contact with people of other faiths and sheer ignorance of them in consequence.

Chapter 6 shows how all that changed from the middle of the 19th century, as missionaries from the West came into contact with people of other faiths and tried to fit them into their theological understanding.

Chapter 7 reviews the development of Roman Catholic theology after the Second Vatican Council, where the most influential thinker has been Karl Rahner, with his doctrine of "The Anonymous Christian". This has been a fruitful source of reflection for thinkers such as Knitter and D'Costa.

Chapter 8 records the debate in the Liberal Protestant tradition since 1960. The dominant theme here has usually been expressed in some form of "pluralism" or "relativism", which began with Troeltsch and is seen most clearly in Hick and Race in different forms. Most importantly, it has been based on a genuine encounter with people of other faiths.

In Chapter 9, I examine the World Council of Churches' Dialogue with People of Other Faiths, as exemplified in the work of S J Samartha, and conclude that Dialogue has only just begun.

Chapter 10 summarises the research and argues that progress towards a satisfactory Christian theology of religion will only be made through the medium of an adequate Philosophy of Religion and a revised Doctrine of Revelation.

## CHAPTER 1 : OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND OTHER FAITHS

Any survey of Christian thinking about other faiths must begin with the Bible and the thinking of the first people who were Christians. The New Testament contains the foundation documents of the Christian Church. These documents witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, held by Christians to be the Christ of God. They also contain accounts of primary experiences by which men and women were called into a relationship of discipleship with this Jesus. Every generation of Christian thinkers must therefore test its thinking against this collection of documents. It is, indeed, a canon of Christian theology.

It has to be remembered, however, that the New Testament did not spring out of thin air. Jesus was a Jew.<sup>1</sup> The first twelve disciples were also Jews. Paul, the first Christian preacher, boasted of his descent from Abraham.<sup>2</sup> The first generation of Christian believers all came from the community of Israel. The thinking of all of them, on all matters, was determined by their Jewish background and, in particular, it was influenced by the Jewish scriptures, which Christians now call the Old Testament and incorporate into their own Bible. The reasons for this incorporation are not hard to find. There are two that suggest themselves more than any others. First, the Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus himself. In it he found everything revealed of the long purpose and

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1. On the Jewishness of Jesus see Geza Vermes, Jesus the Jew, Collins, London, 1973

2. Cf 2 Corinthians 11 v 22

deep scope of God's plan of salvation. Second, because the Old Testament is the Lexicon of the New. In it are found all the great New Testament words and themes. The Old Testament is therefore the key to the New Testament. Any survey of Christian thinking about other faiths must therefore begin not only with the Bible but with the Old Testament.

The influence of the Old Testament on the New is so great that one theologian has written of it:

"The New Testament writers made use of the rich and profound theology of the Old Testament, and of the forms in which it was cast, in order to portray, in the very way their story was told, not only that certain events took place, but that in their taking place they possessed a specific theological significance to which the Old Testament forms and stories were, in their view, a divinely appointed anticipatory type."<sup>3</sup>

The claim is, then, that the theology of the Old Testament, the forms in which it was written, the thought-world from which it sprang and the very words in which it was cast, are all necessary prerequisites for an understanding of what the New Testament says. Anyone who wants to understand what the New Testament has to say about anything must begin by asking what the Old Testament has to say about the same thing, for, "the high probability is that the Old Testament words and thoughts lie behind every book of the New Testament".<sup>4</sup>

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3. John Marsh, The Theology of the New Testament, Black and Rowley (Ed), New Peake's Commentary on the Bible, Nelson, London, 1962, p 756

4. Ibid p 757

When it comes to considering the problem of encounter and dialogue with people of other faiths it has to be admitted at the outset that the writers of the Old Testament knew nothing of the problem as we know it. They knew something of the religions of Egypt and Babylon, but of the great traditions of India and China they were ignorant. The Muslim and Sikh traditions only came into existence long after the canon of the Old Testament was closed. Wesley Ariarajah, writing about the subject in The Bible and Other Faiths, makes the point early in his book:

"The first problem is that the Bible is not a book that deals with other faiths or with the question of dialogue with people of other faiths. In fact, in some ways, it deals with quite the opposite of dialogue. It is primarily about two faiths we have today, Judaism and Christianity. In much of the material in it there is open witness offered to these two religious traditions by those who stand within them and bear testimony to their beliefs. What we have on other faiths in the Bible is therefore incidental to the major concern, which is to bear witness to one's own faith."<sup>5</sup>

The same point is made by Stanley Samartha, who also claims that most Christians assume that what the Bible has to say about other faiths is negative. In that sense, therefore, he asserts that the Bible is a hindrance to encounter and dialogue. But, he also claims that the biblical theology underlying this negative assumption is a "narrow corridor" and not the only possibility. His specific target is the -----

5. Wesley Ariarajah, The Bible and People of Other Faiths, WCC, Geneva, 1985, p xii

'Heilsgeschichte' school of biblical theology which, he alleges, has a narrow view of revelation. He also goes on the claim that the Bible, in both Old Testament and New Testament, contains many theologies and not just one, and that no single method of interpretation can be set up as the norm. He further argues that it is doubtful whether Israel's faith was as distinctive and unique as is sometimes claimed, and that the basic assumption that there are two sorts of history is now seriously questioned by many scholars as unnecessary and artificial.<sup>6</sup>

With this we can agree. It is certainly true that the type of theology known by the title 'salvation-history' is not necessarily the dominant one in Christian biblical studies today. There are other theologies of the Bible, for example, based on the concepts of 'authority' and 'function', which appeal to many and are not as inimical to the dialogue as the salvation-history type.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the Bible in general, and the Old Testament in particular, need to be treated with great care in the matter of other faiths. We have been reminded by scholars such as Dennis Nineham, for example, that the cultural gap between the biblical world and our own may now be so great as to be impossible to bridge.<sup>8</sup> If this is so then the influence of Old Testament theology on Christian thinking may be dubious. Samartha seems to recognise this when he says:

"The Bible does not give us a blueprint to solve modern problems. The question of the relationship

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6. Stanley J Samartha Courage for Dialogue, WCC, Geneva, 1981 p 70

7. Cf James Barr, The Bible in the Modern World, SCM, London, 1978, especially chapter 11

8. Cf Dennis Nineham, The Use and Abuse of the Bible, SPCK, London, 1974, passim

of people of different faiths is a new problem which cannot be compared with Israel's relations with her neighbours or early Christianity's relations with the religions of the Roman Empire."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this, Kenneth Cracknell claims that the problem of other faiths is one that has been forced upon the Christian Church by the modern world. In particular, he sees four facts about this modern world which have been especially instrumental in bringing the dialogue between religions into the open. These four facts are:

1. The religious map has altered. There was a time when the great religious traditions were confined by geographical features. Each had its own 'area' and was contained within it. This is no longer the case. The religions have spread outside their traditional areas.

2. There is more than one missionary religion. Buddhism and Islam are just as mission-minded as Christianity. They see themselves as faiths for the whole world. In addition, the universality of the Hindu message and the appropriateness of the Sikh way for all people are now being stressed.

3. The effects of secularisation are such that all world religions need to reshape their thinking. The critical approach is now universal and demands a response from all faiths. There is thus a need for a community of all faiths in the face of adversity.

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9. Courage for Dialogue, p 93



4. The ideological struggles of the world involve all the world religions. The search for a new society does not take place within a religious vacuum. Increasingly, we also recognise that the future of the world will be decided not in the West but by men and women of Asia, Africa and South America.<sup>10</sup>

To all this, which is well said, one would also want to add the fact that we now live in a world community. Modern means of transport and methods of communication have brought men and women of all races and religions into daily and instant contact. The meeting of East and West, the encounter between Muslim and Christian, the dialogue between Communist and Democrat, all these are facts of the modern world.

Despite the fact that the problem of other faiths is a 'new' one, a product of the modern world, and despite the fact that it is not an open question in the Bible, there is one sense in which Old Testament theology is important for Christians. Wesley Ariarajah states it in this way:

"We must, therefore, draw out the implications of the biblical teaching, rather than look for direct guidance on dialogue."<sup>11</sup>

What is claimed here is that the Old Testament, by what it has to say in general, about the nature of God and his relationship with his creation, gives support to a more open attitude to men and women of other faiths. But, I shall claim that this is not as obvious as

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10. Kenneth Cracknell, Why Dialogue, BCC, London, 1980, p 2

11. The Bible and People of Other Faiths, p xiii

Ariarajah seems to think. The theology of the Old Testament is ambiguous. On the one hand, the doctrine of Creation found there seems to hold out the possibility of a positive and gracious spirit towards other people and their different faiths. It seems to indicate that there is room for a religious universalism. On the other hand, the doctrine of Covenant and Election seems to contain the seeds of an exclusivist theology with a dismissal of other people and their faiths simply because they are 'other'. In any case, as Samartha has pointed out, arguments from silence are always particularly dangerous:

"Because little is said in scripture about the relationship of Christians with people of other faiths it is doubtful whether it is helpful to claim the support of the scriptures alone for an exclusive or inclusive attitude towards the work of the Spirit in relation to people of other faiths."<sup>12</sup>

With that warning, then, we now turn to examine what the Old Testament has to say on the subjects of Universalism and Exclusivism.

Old Testament theology contains the seeds of an inclusivist and universalist faith because in the Old Testament there is a unity of all people based on the fact that all people are seen as creatures of the One, True God. The opening words of the Bible tell us that God created the heavens and the earth. Within a few verses we are also told that God created man in his own image. Neither of these two statements is ever denied in anything that follows. The God of

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12. Courage for Dialogue, p 72

Israel is the God of all the earth. He is the creator of all human beings. They are made in his image and likeness. All human society is under his watchful eye.<sup>13</sup>

This inclusivist emphasis is so clear that it commends itself to Christian writers of many different theological types, including those of a conservative nature. Thus, the authors of Christianity and Other Faiths, sub-titled "An Evangelical Contribution to our Multi-Faith Society", are clear that the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis are about God's dealings with the whole of mankind and that,

"This whole section is vitally important as indicating God's relations with all people, before the call of Abraham and his descendants, with the special covenants which were given to them."<sup>14</sup>

One theologian of the Christian mission has seen this emphasis not only as a basis for an impressive unity of mankind but also for a similar unity of religion. Stephen Neill, writing the History of Christian Missions, says:

"If the God of Israel really is the Creator of the whole universe, if he carries all the nations in his hand, then the unity of the world of nature and of men is guaranteed, and it seems to follow, as part of the divine purpose, that sooner or later all men should find their way to the God who has made them. Unity in religion is the natural

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13. Cf the Book of Genesis, chapters 1 and 2 for the biblical creation narratives

14. Christianity and Other Faiths, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1983, p 15

corollary of the doctrine that all men are already  
one under God."<sup>15</sup>

This, then, is the first pointer in the Old Testament to the possibility of an inclusivist theology - what might be called a theology of dialogue. A second pointer is to be found in what have been titled 'Universal Covenants'. According to the Report of the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Board for Mission and Unity of the Church of England,<sup>16</sup> these are three in number: that made with Adam, that made with Noah and that made with Abram. They are reckoned to be 'primary' as against that made with Moses. We are also urged to believe that when these covenants are regarded as primary a dramatically different reading of the Old Testament becomes possible. The direction of salvation history is said to be pointed in a different way, to the recognition that all humanity is not just the creation of God but the people of God and that the God of the Jewish revelation is the God of all peoples.<sup>17</sup>

The Adamic covenant is said to come in the context of God giving man dominion and the sign of it is the Sabbath, but there is not much evidence that this is so. Genesis 2,1-3 tells us:

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and  
all the host of them. And on the seventh day God  
finished his work which he had done, and he rested  
on the seventh day from all the work which he had

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15. Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1964, p 18

16. Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue ..., CIO, London, 1984

17. Ibid p 15

done. So, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation."

H H Rowley tells us that the Sabbath was a very ancient institution in Israel and that it was quite definitely a religious institution, "But the only provision given was that it was to be a day of rest from work."<sup>18</sup> This accords with the generally accepted position that the Sabbath was to allow rest from work and then the opportunity for worship. Nowhere is it suggested that the Sabbath is a sign of a universal covenant which God has entered into with all mankind. Rather, it seems clear that the Sabbath was an institution of early Israel having social and religious connotations.

The so-called universal covenant with Noah is made much of by both Kenneth Cracknell and Wesley Ariarajah. Cracknell points to Genesis 9 verse 12 as the key verse:

"And God said 'This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations.'"

And, he goes on the comment:

"The covenant with Noah is thus supremely important. It is totally unconditional upon any response from human beings themselves. It is established in the full recognition of the wickedness and weakness and foolishness of the human frame. It is made entirely upon the

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18. H H Rowley, The Faith of Israel, SCM, London, 1956, p 141

initiative of God and will be sustained by his  
faithfulness alone ....<sup>19</sup>

Ariarajah also reminds us that this covenant goes beyond just humanity in its scope. It embraces all living things - "every living creature". It is therefore a moving account of God's compassion for all creatures and his decision to bless them again so that they might multiply and fill the earth.<sup>20</sup>

There is no doubt that this covenant is a powerful statement of God's care for all his creatures and a reminder of the dependency of all life upon God. But, Cracknell does seem to have become more than a little over-enthusiastic in his commendation of it as being without conditions. For, earlier in chapter 9, Noah is told:

"Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that  
is its blood."

and

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his  
blood be shed."

and

"And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth  
abundantly on the earth and multiply in it."<sup>21</sup>

The conditions of this covenant are therefore fairly clear. The first one is that meat shall not be eaten with blood still in it. The second is that killing is forbidden. And the third is fruitfulness. We have, then, a universal covenant, but not one that

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19. Why Dialogue?, p 15

20. The Bible and People of Other Faiths, p 3

21. Genesis 9, verses 4,6 and 7

is universally recognised. This is a paradox which we meet more than once in the Old Testament. It is noted particularly by Christopher Sugden in his booklet entitled Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue where he points out:

"The God of Christian revelation is the God of all peoples, but the Bible nowhere affirms that all people are the people of God."<sup>22</sup>

The third universal covenant is said to be that made with Abram in Genesis 12, which is "in order that all people shall be blessed". But here the Report of the Board of Mission and Unity is alone in its contention of universality. For example, Ariarajah says:

"From Genesis chapter 12, however, this universal story narrows down to the story of Israel. It is important to notice this, because one can never understand the Bible unless one recognises that from this point onwards the Bible is primarily concerned with the story of Israel and not of other nations."<sup>23</sup>

The question we are led to ask, therefore, is whether the Old Testament is really concerned with any story other than the story of Israel. The figures of Adam, Noah and Abram are generally reckoned to be patriarchal. They are representatives rather than actual historical personages. Their stories embrace a host of traditions concerning the origins of Israel as a self-conscious nation. The

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22. Christopher Sugden, Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue, Grove Books, Nottingham, 1985, p 15

23. The Bible and People of Other Faiths, p 3

covenants they enter into, in terms of Old Testament theology at least, they enter into as representatives of Israel rather than humanity. These covenants are precursors of the Mosaic covenant and the mission of Israel to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'. It seems, therefore, that it would be unwise to place too much reliance on this idea of universal covenant.

On the other hand, these covenants do emphasise one aspect of the nature of God which bears upon the possibility of a theology of dialogue arising from the Old Testament. This aspect is that of the Universal Lordship of God and it is clearly elaborated in the prophets. For example, the opening verses of the Book of Amos put all nations, including Israel, under the judgment of God:

"Thus says the Lord:

'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ....

'For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ....

'For three transgressions of Tyre ....

'For three transgressions of Edom ....

'For three transgressions of the Ammonites ...."<sup>24</sup>

But, if nations can be the objects of God's wrath and punishment, they can also be the objects of his care and concern. The Universal Lordship of God is not expressed in anger alone but in love as well. Amos expresses this in Chapter 9, where he writes:

"'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?' says the Lord. 'Did I not bring up

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24. See Amos Chapter 1, verse 3 to Chapter 2, verse 8



Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines  
from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"<sup>25</sup>

Just as God has shown his care and concern for Israel, so he has shown it also for the Philistines and Syrians. People of other nations, and people who follow other gods, are within the scope of his lordship.

One further result of this belief is to be found elsewhere in the Old Testament in the assertion that the rulers of other nations can fulfil the will of God, even unwittingly. So, Isaiah writes:

"Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my  
fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and  
against the people of my wrath I command him, to  
take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them  
down like the mire of the streets."<sup>26</sup>

According to these words, Assyria will be used by God as an instrument to punish Israel. But, it is also clear that this does not exempt Assyria herself from punishment:

"When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount  
Zion and on Jerusalem he will punish the arrogant  
boasting of the King of Assyria and his haughty  
pride."<sup>27</sup>

This introduces the theologically important idea that Assyria is being used to punish Israel not because she is good but because God wills it to be so. Despite being the instrument of the Lord, the

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25. See Amos 9 v 7

26. See Isaiah 10 v 5 & 6

27. See Isaiah 10 v 2

King of Assyria is still arrogant, boastful and haughty and needs to be taught a lesson.

Another result of the belief in the Universal Lordship of God is to be found in Isaiah Chapter 19, where the promise is given that the Lord will do for Egypt all that he has already done for Israel, including the redemption of the people from oppression:

"It will be a sign and witness to the Lord of Hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of the oppressors he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them."<sup>28</sup>

One final point to be noted in connection with the notion of the Universal Lordship of God is that in Isaiah Chapter 45 a foreign king is said to be the instrument of God's purposes:

"Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue the nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed."<sup>29</sup>

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28. See Isaiah 19 v 20 & 21

29. See Isaiah 45 v 1

In addition to this belief in the Universal Lordship of God, the Old Testament seems to suggest, at times, a further belief that God does communicate his will to those outside the Covenant of Israel:

Genesis 14,18: tells of Melchizedek, King of Salem. He is called 'the priest of God most high' and blesses Abram, as he then was, in the name of 'God most high'. It seems clear, from the context, that the author intends this to be understood as an authentic 'word from the Lord'.

Genesis 20,4: Abimelech, King of Gerar, speaks with God in a night-vision and God guides him in his action.

Exodus 18: Here we have the story of a priest of Midian, who not only offers sacrifice acceptable to God, but speaks the word of the Lord to Moses. This priest of Midian is Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses.

Numbers 22-24: gives us the story of Balaam, son of Peor, at Pethor in the land of Amaw. Throughout these chapters he is pictured as discoursing with the Lord. In particular, we are told that he speaks 'the oracle of him who hears the word of God, who sees visions of the Almighty'.

Ezekiel 14,14: contains a tiny reference to the Syrian Daniel, the righteous judge of widows and orphans who is instanced as a figure of outstanding worth, alongside Job and Noah.

Furthermore, within the Canon of the Old Testament, there are two books that might be described as broader in their views of other peoples and their faiths than the majority:

The Book of Jonah tells how the prophet Jonah is told to go and preach at Nineveh, because of the wickedness of the people, and to bring them to repentance. He is unwilling to go and tries to avoid

the call. His plan fails and he finds himself forced to carry out the mission, as he was first directed. The people of Nineveh repent at his preaching and, in consequence, God relents. He sets aside his threat of punishment on them. This makes Jonah very angry. Full of self-pity, he wishes to die and escape it all. In this mood his anger and indignation are directed against a plant which offered him temporary shelter from the scorching sun, but then quickly withered. Through this incident, then, Jonah is brought to realise that God has pity on whom he will, no matter what nation they belong to, and even if they are wicked Ninevites. The clear purpose of this book, therefore, is to show that Jonah was in the wrong, both in refusing to preach to the Ninevites and then in being angry at their subsequent repentance and forgiveness. The message of the book is that in the providence of God even a non-Israelite people might turn to him in repentance and worship him. This sort of spirit was rarely made articulate in the literature of Israel. It seems, therefore, that the book belongs to the period following the Exile, after the writings now found in Isaiah 40-55 had expressed the universality of God's rule in the manner noted below.<sup>30</sup>

Another writing which echoes the same theme is the Book of Ruth, which almost certainly comes from the same period. This is another parable which seeks to awaken the people of Israel to their high responsibility as the people of God. It tells how Naomi, a Judaeen, after the death in Moab of her husband and two sons, started to return to Bethlehem, leaving her Moabite daughters-in-law. But Ruth,

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30. L H Brockington, Jonah in New Peak's Commentary on the Bible, Nelson, London, 1962, p 627

one of the Moabite women, loyally stayed with the mother-in-law. She was subsequently married to Boaz, a kinsman, and bore a son who was the grandfather of David, greatest of all Israelite Kings. The point of the story is in the Moabite ancestry of David, the fact that a Moabite woman recognised the claims of Israel's God and was fully received into the commonwealth of Israel.<sup>31</sup>

There is, then, some evidence for a belief, within the theology of the Old Testament, which allowed for some revelation of God outside of the covenant with Israel. God is the One, True God. He is the creator and sustainer of all. He judges many nations and blesses many peoples. He even speaks to those who are not of Israel, offering then mercy and forgiveness. And, those who are not of Israel can serve him in righteousness. Yet, if this is a theme within the Old Testament, it is only a submerged theme. The dominant theology is that of the covenant, and not of the so-called 'universal covenants' of Adam and Noah, but the special covenant, entered into first with Abram and re-established over and over again with the prominent figures in the history of Israel. This is the true legacy of the Old Testament for Christian theology, for this is the theology which is re-interpreted in the New Testament. It is important, therefore, to look at it in some detail.

The special covenant begins with Abram and is recorded in Genesis 12. It involves not only a favoured position for the people of Abram but a special responsibility to bring God's blessing to all mankind.

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31. Cf A S Herbert, Ruth in Peake's Commentary on the Bible, pp 316-317

There are three aspects of this covenant which stand out as worthy of attention and comment:

1. First of all, there are many passages in the Old Testament which re-inforce the message of Genesis 12, namely that God chose 'the nation of Israel' to be his own people. In Old Testament theology this is seen as a conscious choice that God makes from among all the nations. It is therefore impossible to escape 'the scandal of particularity'. Israel is a chosen people and this choice implies some special status.

2. Secondly, this covenant relationship is ratified over and over again. It begins with Abram, it is renewed with Moses, it is given new meaning with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This is not a submerged theme within the Old Testament. It is the dominant understanding of the relationship of Israel with God.

3. Thirdly, it carries with it the belief that Israel is 'the light to lighten the Gentiles', or that God will bless other nations through the faithfulness of Israel. Hence, this covenant theology is not only the dominant motif for understanding the relationship of other nations to the same God. In so far as they have any relationship with the One, True God it is through the role of Israel as the light of the nations'.

In thinking about the Old Testament and other faiths, therefore, this is the theology we have to reckon with as the normative way of thinking. More than that, it is the theology which the Christian Church inherited and re-interpreted. Indeed, the Church went further than any theologian of the old covenant and claimed that God has now

expressed a new choice. The Christian scriptures claim that the Christians are the true chosen people for the new age which has been inaugurated by Jesus. This idea is found in the writings of Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews, but it is most clearly expressed in 1 Peter 2, 9 and 10:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.!"<sup>32</sup>

It will be seen that this passage contains most of the elements of the Old Testament covenant theology, but re-interpreted in terms of the Christian Church. Thus, Christians are 'chosen' and they are 'God's own people', but so that they may 'declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'. They are therefore meant to be a light to lighten the Gentiles in their own day and in their own way. The covenant is interpreted in terms of the privileges afforded to the elect. Because Israel understood herself as having been selected out of all the nations it was also possible for some to see this in terms of Israel being the sole recipients of God's grace and concern.

Christian theologians of the Old Testament are usually quick to point out that this election is never an end in itself. Thus, Abram is

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32. Cf The Bible and People of Other Faiths, pp 3-5

chosen. God calls him and makes his covenant with him and his descendants, not as a private and personal transaction but that, through him and them, all the nations of the earth might be blessed. And, though further election may narrow down the line of promise - Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau - till Israel is grown and ready for the national covenant at Sinai, even then Israel is chosen from among all the families of the earth not for its own sake, but that it might be a means of blessing to the Gentiles. Nevertheless, it is difficult to escape the conclusion of a doctrine of election, which is that those who are chosen are favoured, as compared with all the others.

The idea of election is put forward in the Old Testament as the ideal calling of Israel. It is an idea that is at its clearest in Deutero-Isaiah. But it is a calling from which the nation fell fatally short. Thus, Isaiah 42,19:

"Who is blind as my servant, or deaf as my  
messenger whom I send?"

As a matter of fact, Israel did not live up to the responsibility of being the Chosen People. So, there was a further refinement of the doctrine of election - an election within the election, the emergence of a true and spiritual Israel within the natural Israel. In the works of the greater prophets this narrowing-down process is exposed in the doctrine of the remnant, which is seen clearly in Isaiah 1, 7-9:

"Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned  
with fire; in your presence aliens devour your  
land; it is desolate, as overthrown by aliens ....



If the Lord of hosts had not left a few survivors,  
we should have been like Sodom, and become like  
Gomorrah."

The doctrine of the remnant, then, is about a narrowing-down process - from a chosen nation, to a chosen remnant, to a godly kernel within the unbelieving mass. There is little room here, then, for an appreciative assessment of the faiths of other peoples. It is the contrast between Israel (whether viewed as one or two kingdoms) as the People of God, and the others - all the rest of the human race, usually designated as 'the nations', rather than the similarity between them, which runs through the Old Testament. And this is exemplified in the attitude of the Old Testament to other gods.

In early Israel there seems to have been a belief that other gods did not exist. Old Testament theologians have argued for a long time about the concept of monotheism. Lines such as those in Judges 11, 24, however, seem to suggest that the Israelites certainly acknowledged the existence of other gods at the time when they were struggling to establish themselves in the Promised Land:

"Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives  
you to possess?"

At this time, then, each nation was reckoned to be justified in worshipping its own god but, under the covenant, Israel was not permitted to worship any other god but the One, True God. The first of the Ten Commandments is brief and to the point on this matter:

"You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>33</sup>

But, the very prohibition suggests the possibility of that which it

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33. Exodus 20,3

prohibits. What is the point of forbidding worship if there is nothing to worship? Later, however, when the belief in the absolute claims of God came to possess the mind of Israel, from the time of the earliest literary prophets such as Amos and Micah, the nations came to be seen as worshippers of idols and this led to hostility on the part of Israel. This hostility was only sometimes modified by the rules of hospitality, by practical alliances and by the needs of commerce.

Thus, the writing prophets have nothing positive to say about the religions of Israel's neighbours. At first they treat the other gods as rivals, but inferior to the One, True God. They have neither his power nor his righteousness. In the later prophets, however, the pagan gods are dismissed as having no reality at all. Deutero-Isaiah again expresses this well:

"Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and the Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.'"<sup>34</sup>

Hence, the reforms instituted by Josiah in the Southern Kingdom, based upon the re-discovered Deuteronomic Law, were aimed at stamping out any form of syncretism resulting from contact with other nations. One of the results of these reforms was to widen the gulf between Israel and her neighbours, who were thought of as alien people. This is seen most clearly in the reform which laid down that Israelites were not to marry non-Israelites.

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34.

Isaiah 44,6

The antipathy towards other nations and their gods created by the narrowing-down process from covenant to remnant was intensified by the Captivity in Babylon, where national exclusiveness became the dominant doctrine. In captivity, the Jews were told that all their calamities had come upon them because of their disloyalty and especially because of their compromise with foreign nations and their idolatrous ways:

"Behold it is written before me: 'I will not keep silent, but I will repay, yea, I will repay into their bosom their iniquities and their father's iniquities together' says the Lord: 'because they burned incense upon the mountains and reviled me upon the hills, I will measure into their bosom payments for their former doings.'"<sup>35</sup>

In Babylon, during the Exile, Ezekiel drew up a programme of worship and organisation for the nation after the Return. This laid stress upon the doctrine that Israel was to be a holy people (again), separate from the nations, and it is seen at its clearest in Ezekiel 40 to 48. On the Return, Ezra and Nehemiah won the battle for nationalism. This was especially true in religious life and it protected them from any influence from outside. It also made it very difficult for them to say anything positive about those who did not share their faith.

In summary, therefore, we may say that the attitude of the Old Testament to those of other faiths is ambivalent. In the doctrine of

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35.     Isaiah 65,6 and 7

creation there are seeds of a positive and gracious attitude to other peoples; the so-called 'universal covenants' suggest a God who is God of all men and women and who both judges and blesses all peoples; there are two books of the Old Testament with universalist themes and it is possible to find references scattered throughout the rest of the literature to the possibility of God speaking outside the covenant with Israel.

But, it is the covenant which is the dominant theological motif in the Old Testament; it is the doctrines of election and remnant which determine Israel's faith; it is the belief that they are the People of God which leads them to the position of saying that they are right in matters of religion, while everyone else is wrong. This is 'the scandal of particularity' and it has far-reaching and important effects. It also led to confusion and ambiguity among the first Christians, who tried to assimilate this theology into their new faith and their own exclusivism.

## CHAPTER 2 :

### THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OTHER FAITHS

The New Testament does not exhibit a single and coherent attitude to the religions and faiths existing in the social milieu in which the Christian Church was born. There are various reasons for this, but the most important reason is that the New Testament does not have a single and coherent attitude to anything. The first Christians were Jews who had inherited the theology of Judaism and, as we have seen already, that theology was not necessarily monolithic, although it was certainly weighted in one direction.

Writing about The New Testament and Non-Christian Religions, Martin Forward has found three reasons for a lack of coherence among New Testament writers:

1. First of all, he notes that the major theological concern of New Testament writers was Christological. They were therefore intent on giving an account of the nature and purpose of the work of Jesus rather than being anxious to fit the new Christian Faith into any religious scheme.

2. Secondly, Paul suggests that humility is the essential response to the mystery of what God has done for mankind in the Person and Work of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 13, for example, Paul emphasises that our knowledge is 'imperfect' and that we only see in a mirror and 'dimly'. The suggestion is, then, that New Testament theology is characterised by reticence rather than speculation, at the one extreme, and dogmatism, at the other.

3. Thirdly, he notes that the Semites have a preference for the use of paradox as a bearer of truth.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament, then, we have a combination of ingredients. We have an ambivalent legacy from the Old Testament; we have an overwhelming concern to 'fit' Christ into a monotheistic system; and we have a humble and paradoxical response to the mystery that is God in Christ. We must therefore expect the writers of the New Testament to provide many and differing views. One leading New Testament theologian has expressed it as follows:

".... the concern about a theology of the New Testament found itself from the outset confronted with the problem of the diversity and unity in the New Testament."<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who wants to study the New Testament attitude to Other Faiths must therefore come to terms with this problem - that there is no single New Testament theology and that there are only the theologies of the different New Testament writers, each with his own concerns and emphases.

What are we to do about this problem? The German New Testament theologian, W G Kümmel, provides an answer:

"The task of the theology of the New Testament can only consist in first allowing the individual

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1. Cf Martin Forward, The New Testament and Non-Christian Religions, in The Epworth Review, Vol 11 no 2, pp 59-60

2. W G Kümmel, Theology of the New Testament, SCM, 1974, p 15

writings, or groups of writings, to speak for themselves, and only then to ask about a unity which is shown therein, or else to affirm a diversity which cannot be eliminated."<sup>3</sup>

If we follow this scheme and allow the individual writings to speak for themselves, however, we come up against another problem, that of New Testament criticism and, in particular, the question, "What can we know about Jesus?"

The most important source of our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth is the New Testaments and, especially, the Gospels. In these four documents, various speakers are represented as addressing Jesus as 'Son of God', 'the Christ', 'Son of David' and 'Lord'. It seems clear that these titles are intended to convey messianic status, but the question we need to ask is this: Did they have any sanction in the mind of Jesus himself? Was he conscious of being more than a prophet and rabbi? Did he demand belief in himself, or did the Early Church, in its confessions of faith in him as God's redeemer, read back these Christological titles into the traditions?

The debate about the messianic consciousness of Jesus has raged for seventy years and still is not settled. We know nothing of his interior life and some scholars have argued that we can know next to nothing about him at all. The Jewish writer, Geza Vermes, thinks that Christian scholars are too sceptical in their biographies of Jesus. He points out that there are four Gospels which give his life and details of his teaching and that no other rabbi had such lives

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3. Ibid p 17

written about him. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many Christian scholars are not too confident of recovering too many details of the life and teaching of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

The scholar who has been most closely associated with this sceptical view of Jesus is Rudolf Bultmann. He believes that it is not possible to strip away the layers of faith in the Gospels and to arrive at the simple picture of an original Jesus. Whatever we read in the New Testament has to be viewed with the greatest suspicion because it comes to us through the lens of faith. One of Bultmann's disciples (who is not usually regarded as being as radical as his master) put this view plainly:

"We possess no single word of Jesus and no single story of Jesus, no matter how incontestably genuine they may be, which do not embody at the same time the confession of the believing congregation or at least are embodied therein. This makes the search after the base facts of history difficult and to a large extent futile."<sup>5</sup>

Despite all this, Bultmann did write a book entitled Jesus and the Word in which he is represented as a rabbinical teacher and prophetic healer who, through his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, confronted men and women with the will of God. He crystallised Jesus' message in this way by the use of form-critical methods, which attempt to get behind the present form of the Gospels and examine the

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4. Cf Geza Vermes, Jesus the Jew

5. Gunther Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1973, p 14 (First Edition 1960)



pre-literary forms of the oral tradition. For our purposes, his treatment of the so-called 'Son of Man Sayings' is of the greatest interest.<sup>6</sup>

The Synoptic Gospels contain a number of sayings in which Jesus refers to a 'Son of Man'. Among New Testament scholars there has been great discussion about who Jesus was referring to in his use of this title. Bultmann made a classification of the sayings in relation to (1) his future coming, (2) his suffering, death and resurrection and (3) his present work. This third class contains the following sayings:

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ...." (Mark 2,10)

and

"The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 2,28)

Bultmann claims that these passages reflect the common Hebrew and Aramaic use of 'Son of Man' for either 'man' or 'I'. If the latter is correct then here are at least two passages in which Jesus appears to claim that he has authority to forgive sins and that he was lord even of such powerful religious institutions as the Sabbath. On the other hand, if these sayings are interpreted as referring to 'man' they yield an entirely different meaning.<sup>7</sup>

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6. On the whole debate see Otto Betz, What Do We Know About Jesus?, SCM, 1969, passim

7. Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus and the Word, Fontana Edition, 1958, (First published in German in 1926)

The question of whether Jesus understood himself as a messianic figure is therefore obscure. The weight that can be placed on the Gospel writings is not as substantial as might be supposed. The Gospels are not literary and historical biographies of Jesus of Nazareth. The 'Quest for the Historical Jesus' is a quest. If we want to speak confidently about his life and teachings then we have to search out evidence and produce reasons for our conclusions. Yet, despite this, some scholars feel that it is possible to recover a general outline of the character and ministry of the man.

Robert Grant, for example, feels that he can speak of five reasons why people responded to Jesus. He sets them out in his book entitled, A Historical Introduction to the New Testament, as follows:

1. They were probably impressed by his power over demons and diseases.
2. They recognised in him a new interpretation of the moral teaching of the prophetic tradition in Israel.
3. Jesus appealed to many by using a great deal of analogy in his teaching, which meant that they could readily understand what he was teaching.
4. Many of the original hearers of Jesus were also influenced by his apocalyptic expectations.
5. Jesus promised rewards for those who followed him and punishments for those who did not.<sup>8</sup>

In his book, The Bible and People of Other Faiths, Wesley Ariarajah

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8. Robert Grant, A Historical Introduction to the New Testament, Fontana Edition, London, 1971 (first published 1963) pp 341-345

also gives an outline of the life and teaching of Jesus and the demands that he made. In line with the majority of New Testament scholars, Ariarajah claims that there is a significant difference between the Jesus who emerges from the Gospel of John and the one found in the Synoptic Gospels. The most striking fact about the Jesus of the Synoptics, Ariarajah claims, is his own God-centred life. He never calls himself 'Son of God' but 'Son of Man' (although this is arguable, as we have seen). He sees his primary function as the initiator of the Kingdom of God (although it is arguable that the idea of the Kingdom is present in the Old Testament). He announces the forgiveness that accompanies the coming of the Kingdom, calls people to repentance and challenges them to a profoundly ethical understanding of the relationship between God and man, and between man and man. It is God who offers life to all who enter the Kingdom. Jesus' own life is entirely God-centred. Ariarajah then claims that it would be strange in the Synoptic environment for Jesus to say "I and the Father are one" or "I am the way, the truth and the life". He concludes his argument by saying:

"There seems to be no claim to divinity or to oneness with God; what we have is the challenge to live lives that are totally turned towards God."<sup>9</sup>

In another place, Ariarajah also states that it is of interest that Jesus claims that he did come to abolish the Law and gave as a summary of his own teaching the Deuteronomic statement of the whole Law:

"Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is One Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your

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9. Wesley Ariarajah, The Bible and People of Other Faiths, p 21

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your  
might."<sup>10</sup>

A final point for Ariarajah is that Jesus seems to identify himself with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah rather than with any mediator between God and man. In Jesus, then, we see someone who is primarily a teacher, one who tells stories, speaks in parables, mixes with despised people, loves the ordinary people and the masses.<sup>11</sup> In this assessment Ariarajah has the great German New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias with him. For, he went so far as to say that it was this love of the masses, this mixing with the despised and the outlawed that was the single unique and authentic sign of the ministry of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

The figure of the man and the outline of his teaching that emerges from both Grant and Ariarajah is similar. We see here a man who appeals to the ordinary people with both the method and the content of his teaching. The method is simple and parabolic. The content is a new interpretation of the Law and especially the ethical content of the prophetic tradition. The question is whether we can go further and say that Jesus demanded faith in himself as a pre-requisite for salvation. For, if he does, the way into the Kingdom would appear to be barred to those who either cannot or will not believe in him. This, in turn, is obviously of the utmost importance when we come to apply the New Testament teaching to the situation in which the Church finds itself today when thinking about people of other faiths.

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10. Ibid p 22. Cf Deuteronomy 6 v 4 and Mark 12,28-34

11. Ibid p 22

12. Cf Joachim Jeremias, New Testament Theology, SCM, London, 1971

Jesus speaks much of faith, but it seems to be mainly faith in God. He expects his disciples to trust God, even for impossible things. He wants to lead men to faith in God:

"For Jesus, faith is the daring trust in God's concern and help to which he would like to lead his disciples."<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, there are passages in which he seems to suggest that listening to his words will bring men and women to faith in God:

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock."<sup>14</sup>

Which of these sayings most clearly represents what was the true burden of the message of Jesus? This is the sort of question that can only be answered by those who have spent a life time immersed in the study of the New Testament. Even then, the conclusions will be determined by the pre-suppositions. Making due allowance for all this, let us note that Wright and Fuller, in their introduction to the study of biblical theology, make this comment:

"In the Markan summary (of the teaching of Jesus) Jesus does not link the drawing near of the reign of God explicitly with his own emergence and proclamation. But, it is clear that Jesus saw precisely in his own proclamation the first sign of the dawning act of God."<sup>15</sup>

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13. Kümmel, Theology of the New Testament, p 64

14. Matthew 7,24

15. G E Wright and R H Fuller, The Book of the Acts of God, Pelican, London, 1965, p 270

There is therefore, a note of urgency in the preaching of Jesus which cannot be ignored. He spoke of his own coming and the meaning of his mission in the following terms:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon  
the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a  
sword ...."<sup>16</sup>

This, at least, seems ambiguous. It says nothing less than that the coming of Jesus produces a division among people according to their attitude to him. Jesus presents himself, and is presented, as the fulfilment of the covenant made between God and Israel, yet a covenant which is intended for all mankind. We may assume that Jesus knew little or nothing about the religion of Israel's near neighbours, but we do know that he rejected the nationalistic and exclusivist attitudes to the Gentiles found among his contemporaries. These were the attitudes of their own official religious teachers stemming, as we have seen, from the dominant line of Old Testament theology. When Jesus talked to the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7,26), when he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10,25ff) and when he held up the Roman Centurion as an example of faith (Luke 7,1ff) he was pointing to wider horizons than the official Jewish teaching allowed.

It seems clear that Jesus did not demand belief in himself as a pre-requisite for salvation. He demanded that his hearers believe in God, turn from their old way of life and turn to a new way in obedience to the law of love. But, it is also clear that the Kingdom is connected with his arrival on the stage of human history and that

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16. Matthew 10,34

an individual's relationship to the Kingdom can be determined by a relationship with him. The evidence is ambiguous, but Kümmel has summed it up well:

"Even if Jesus did not speak of faith in his own person still for him the encounter with God's eschatological kingdom depends entirely on the believing encounter with his actions and teachings, in which God's eschatological redemptive activity is realised."<sup>17</sup>

Part of the problem is, of course, that there are at least two strands in the teaching of the New Testament, which correspond to the old 'Jesus of History and Christ of Faith' dichotomy. Paul and the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, seem to be less interested in the life of Jesus than in his death and resurrection. In particular, they are very interested in the meaning of his death and resurrection. And this has resulted in a New Testament theology which is less bothered with the announcement of the Kingdom of God and its ethical implications and is more bothered with personal salvation.

When we ask the main New Testament witnesses outside the Gospels, therefore, about the status of the non-Christian religions we get two different sorts of answers. One might be called the 'exclusivist' answer - Christianity is the one and only true religion, and all the others are false. The other might be called the 'inclusivist' answer - men of other faiths can be included in God's offer of salvation

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17. Kümmel, Theology of the New Testament, p 64

without first becoming Christians.

So, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke claims to represent the apostolic preaching of Peter. When we read it we find that it too is ambiguous. On the one hand, Peter is recorded as having said:

"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."<sup>18</sup>

The interpretation of this text will be discussed in detail later. But, for the time being, let us note that it represents a statement made to "the rulers, elders and scribes .... gathered together in Jerusalem" and seems to say clearly enough that God's saving activity is limited to those who profess the name of Christ. On the other hand, Luke also later claims to present Peter in a different light:

"And Peter opened his mouth: 'Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'<sup>19</sup>

This is said to Cornelius "a Centurion of what is known as the Italian cohort" and suggests that there is no limit to God's love and mercy. The ambiguity may be ameliorated a little when we consider the different audiences to which these words are addressed. One saying is for the Jews, for those who have rejected Jesus in the name of orthodoxy. The other is for a Roman soldier, a devout and God-fearing man who is actively looking for salvation. But, even if we

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18. Acts 4,12

19. Acts 10,34



allow for this distinction, the ambiguity does not entirely disappear.

Paul is another who is not exactly consistent, but that should not surprise us. In her book Pauline Pieces, Morna Hooker gives eight reasons for difficulty in constructing a 'Pauline theology':

1. Paul gives only a piecemeal picture of his theological position. Everything he wrote was only occasional literature. Whether or not we have a sufficient sample of his total output is now impossible to say.
2. The occasional nature of the literature raises the problem of how we can know whether the situation in which Paul found himself, and the particular situation of the community to which he was writing, have influenced not only what he chose to say, but the way in which he said it.
3. This leads to a further difficulty concerning the nature of the opposition to Paul and the role of the opposition in the composition of his letters.
4. Another difficulty is the 'obsession' with Christology, which tends to make us underestimate the Jewishness of the New Testament.
5. Again, we shall distort Paul if we forget that his beliefs are expressed in terms and forms belonging to the pattern of thought which he inherited.
6. There is a limitation placed upon us by a lack of evidence not only about Paul himself but also about first-century Judaism.
7. Our understanding of Paul may be distorted by the fact we automatically give to words the value the words have for us. Thus, Christians tend to read the New Testament through Chalcedonian spectacles!

8. A final difficulty is the distortion of the canon. When Paul's letters were canonised that meant that they became the basis of later doctrinal systems, which is far removed indeed from their original purpose.

Professor Hooker therefore concludes:

"It is perhaps not surprising if no good theology of Paul has ever been written; he himself did not set out to write systematic theology, and to use occasional literature as the basis of a system must inevitably distort it."<sup>20</sup>

The evidence of confusion and distortion in Paul's writings is clear enough when we come to look for guidance with the problem of other faiths. Thus, he preached that all have sinned and fallen short and can only be saved by the grace of God. In Romans 8,29 he seems to teach a divine predestination to salvation, and he certainly speaks of a divine plan of salvation:

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren."

But, Paul does not seem to say anything about a plan for those who are not called, or those who do not accept the call, except in negative terms. He does reckon with the fact that there are some who are condemned by God and lost. At one point he even warns the believers not to take God's wrath and condemnation too lightly.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Morna D Hooker, Pauline Pieces, Epworth Press, London, 1979 pp 8-17

21. Romans 2,5

Yet, he does not say that such people are destined by God for condemnation. The important truth is this, that God will only condemn those who refuse or do not take seriously his offer of deliverance in Christ.

It is obviously that this is a difficult and worrying area for Paul. As a Jew, he presumably wished to be able to include his own people within the covenant of grace. Yet, as a Christ-mystic, he also wanted to affirm that justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone. Hence, we get what can only be described as his tortured agonisings in Romans 9 to 11, which culminate in his vision of a final, if somewhat mysterious salvation for Jews who have not acknowledged Jesus as Messiah:

"Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved."<sup>22</sup>

On the basis of this, it has sometimes been claimed that Paul proclaimed the salvation of all mankind. However, if we take into account the whole of Romans 9 to 11, it is difficult to hold such a view.

The last word on Paul's theology may never be said but, for the time being, Kummel has again summed up well:

"Hence, one may not say that in Romans 11,25-26 and 32 Paul taught that in the end God will have mercy

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22. Romans 11, 26-26

on all men without exception."<sup>23</sup>

A further aspect of New Testament theology which has had a great influence upon the development of Christian thinking about other religions is the logos-theology developed in the Prologue of John's Gospel.

In classical Greek 'logos' denotes both 'word' and 'reason'. In the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel the term 'logos' is three times applied to Jesus Christ and is used to set forth his peculiar glory as the only-begotten Son of God who is also the Light and Life of men.

Three stages appear in the exposition of the doctrine in the Prologue: First, in verses 1 to 5, the nature and functions of the Logos are set forth in his relations to God, the world and man. The second stage of the exposition, verses 6 to 13, is a contrast of the Logos with the Word of God that came with John the Baptist. Finally, in verses 14 to 18, the author declares his identity with the historical Jesus Christ, the bringer of grace and truth.

The author of the Fourth Gospel uses the Logos concept for two reasons. To set forth Jesus as the Revealer of God and as the Saviour of mankind. What is claimed is that the active reason of God, which was his agent at the creation of the world, is the light of men and enlightens every man. This Word of God has become man in Jesus Christ and shown forth the glory and grace of God. Thus, every human life is related to God through its creation and illumination by the Word of God. This sort of theology seems to hold out the possibility of interpretation along the lines of universal

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23. Kümmel, Theology of the New Testament, p 244

enlightenment and universal salvation. From the time of Justin Martyr, as we shall see, it has served as the basis of more than one Christian metaphysic.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, therefore, we can say that the main New Testament writers offer very little of clear and positive guidance on the question of people of other faiths. If the Old Testament is generally negative towards those who are outside Israel, then the New Testament is also negative towards those who are outside the Church. At its best, the whole of the biblical record seems to say that God has not left himself without a witness and wills that all people should be saved. But this suggests another and more difficult question: How will mankind be saved? Will those of other faiths only be saved if they reject those faiths and turn to Christ? Or, can they be saved within their own traditions? The history of Christian thinking concerns itself with these questions. But, before we leave the biblical material and turn to the tradition, we must examine, in some detail, the two texts which appear to prohibit any form of Christian theology of other religions, other than a negative one.

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24. Cf Henry Chadwick, 'Logos', article in Dictionary of the Bible, edited by F C Grant and H H Rowley, published by T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1963.

## CHAPTER 3 :

### TWO EXCLUSIVE TESTS?

We must now examine in some detail the two texts which seem to exclude the possibility of any Christian theology of other religions, other than a negative one. The two verses are:

John 14,6:

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.'"

and

Acts 4,12:

"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

A plain reading of these verses seems to indicate little scope for a positive evaluation of any of the non-Christian religions. They appear to say, quite categorically, "No Other Way" and "No Other Name". At the same time, it has to be recognised that a plain reading of the texts may not be a true reading. Krister Stendhal makes this point in the Chiang Mai Bible studies:

"The question facing us in our consultation as to Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies are hardly the questions in the minds of the biblical writers. But, they are valid questions of importance. Thus we are rather in a situation where we should say with Paul, "On this matter I have no command from the Lord" (I Cor 7,25). A

Christian theology of religion cannot easily be  
pieced together by direct biblical quotations."<sup>1</sup>

This seems to beg the question! The fact is that these texts exist and that they do answer some questions in the minds of the biblical writers. They also suggest answers to questions in the minds of contemporary Christians. The hermeneutical task is to recover the context and determine the original questions. Then we can ask if they offer any guidance to us. Otherwise, we end up with arguments from silence, or 'supposed' thoughts about what is going on in the minds of the original writers. There is a good example of this in Kenneth Cracknell's treatment of John 14,6, where he writes:

"So, for example, if we ask, as well as we might,  
where was God when the Buddha received his  
enlightenment or what was God doing when Muhammed  
heard the message of the Qur'an, Dr Stendhal would  
say, we imagine, that John 14,6 offers no answer,  
nor should we expect it to."<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to reply to these rhetorical questions, of course, by saying that God had nothing to do with the enlightenment of the Buddha and that he was not present when Muhammed received the message of the Qur'an. That is what many Christians believed for centuries and that is what many Christians believe today. And it is believed by Christians because that is what John 14,6 seems to say on a plain reading - "no one comes to the Father but by me". It is up to Dr Stendhal (and those who support him) to show that there is an

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1. Krister Stendhal in Faith in the Midst of Faiths, Edtd S J Samartha, WCC, Geneva, 1977, pp 124-125

2. Kenneth Cracknell, Why Dialogue, BBC, London, 1980, p 20

alternative way of interpreting the text. With that in mind, let us now look at these two exclusivist texts in more detail.

1. "No Other Way?"

John 14,6:

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.'"

The question we have to ask is what status does the New Testament give to other faiths in view of the unique and absolute claims made for Jesus as the one way to God?

We must begin by noting that this is a text from the Gospel of John and that this fact, in itself, presents us with certain difficulties. These difficulties can be seen in the observations made by John Marsh at the beginning of his commentary on the Fourth Gospel:

"There is no problem of 'introduction' about which a certain solution can be found. Who was the 'John' named as the author? Where did he live? For what audience did he write? What sources did he use? Where was his work written? About all these questions, and a good many more, there are divergent judgments, sometimes put forward with great assurance; yet none of them can claim certainty."<sup>3</sup>

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3. John Marsh, The Gospel of St John, Penguin Books, London, 1968, p 20



This is a clear statement of a large area of uncertainty. We need to be on our guard against dogmatism when it comes to interpreting John's Gospel.

On the question of authorship there is a great deal of debate. It is fair to say that there is along tradition which says that John the son of Zebedee was both 'the beloved disciple' of John 21,20 and the author of the Gospel. The difficulties with this tradition have to do with the age that John would have had to be at the time of writing the Gospel and the unlikelihood of a fisherman and a 'son of thunder' having been able to write such a deep work as this Gospel. On the other hand, of the alternative authors who have been canvassed - mainly John the Elder and John Mark - there is little to be said in their favour. The author of the Fourth Gospel therefore remains anonymous:

"The identity of the author must remain hidden; the splendour of his genius shines perennially."<sup>4</sup>

An evaluation of what that genius might be has been made by John Fenton. He tells us that the Gospel was written around the turn of the first century, that it expresses Christian faith in terms that could be understood by any man of the time, whether he was Jew or Greek, because it makes use of terms which either would feel at home with (cf the use of the term Logos, as discussed previously on p56).<sup>5</sup>

We cannot now be certain of the Evangelist's intention in writing

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4. John Marsh, The Gospel of St John, p 25

5. John Fenton, The Gospel According to John, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p 25ff

down this Gospel. Was it to refute false teachers? Or, was it to propagate faith? Did he write for orthodox Christians, heretical Christians, or for non-Christians? None of these questions is easily answered. Yet, we know that from the time of Irenaeus the Gospel was used by the orthodox against the heretics. Most important of all, we know that in the doctrinal controversies of the following centuries, appeal was made more frequently to this Gospel than to the Synoptics. This is especially true of controversies involving the pre-existence of Christ, the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Here we have an obvious danger, then, of reading the Gospel through those Chalcedonian spectacles of which Morna Hooker warned us (see p53 above).

The questions of authorship and intention are only two of the difficulties confronting the student of the Fourth Gospel. There is also the vexed question of the relationship between John and the Synoptic Gospels. This can be expressed in simple terms by observing that the style and content of the first three Gospels are different from those of the Fourth. But, it is more complicated than that. In particular, there are four headings under which differences can be considered.

1. First, the Evangelist's decision to write theology in a dramatic form has had the result that the picture of Jesus which emerges from the Fourth Gospel is less historical than that which emerges from the Synoptics. In particular, there is "an argumentativeness, a tendency to mystification, about the utterances of the Johannine Christ ...."

which are absent from the Christ of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>6</sup>

2. The style of writing, using ambiguity and contrived misunderstanding, is so marked as to make the Evangelist almost incapable of saying anything unambiguous.

3. John concentrates on Christology, making explicit in his own way what was implicit from the beginning, and omits most of the teaching of Jesus found in the Synoptics.

4. John has set his Gospel in a framework of ideas which is very different from that of the Synoptists. In the Fourth Gospel it is the framework of the pre-existent Word of God, who descends from the Father into the world, and returns to the Father bringing the elect with him.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, it is not easy to reconcile the world of the Synoptics with that of John, nor does the Synoptic Jesus accord easily with the Johannine Christ. Robert Grant has summarised the possible solutions to these differences under three headings:

(i) John did not know either the Synoptics'

traditions or the Synoptic Gospels, but used independent traditions of his own.

(ii) John knew some Synoptic traditions and used them in his Gospel.

(iii) John knew some, or all, of the Synoptic material but consciously re-wrote his sources in order to (a) interpret them or (b) to supplement them or (c) to supplant them.

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6. Cf F C Burkitt, The Gospel History and its Transmission, Edinburgh, 1906, p 227, quoted in Fenton, p 26

7. Cf Fenton, The Gospel According to St John, p 25-28

Grant believes that there are no reliable grounds for deciding between the three possibilities. We are therefore left with the unresolved tension of uncertainty about the relationship of the Johannine material with that of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>8</sup>

When we read John's Gospel, we are reading a document that is very different from the other three Gospels. Furthermore, the authorship of this document is now lost to us, as is the author's intention in writing and in selecting and shaping his material. In addition, the Gospel uses "a first century mythology, foreign to the twentieth century reader".<sup>9</sup> All of this should make us proceed with caution when we come to examine the text in detail.

We turn now to see what the text says to us. According to John Marsh, the text "articulates the high Christology of the Evangelist" and echoes the Logos theology of the Prologue. Thus, he tells us that it is not the case that Jesus is 'away' from the Father and must therefore find and tread the way to him; he is the way himself. Nor is it the case that there is a truth about the Father which Jesus must learn and pass on; he is the truth himself. Nor is it the case that the Father has Eternal Life which he will give to the Son, so that the Son can bestow life; he is the life himself. In other words, "No one has ever seen the Father; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1,18) and this is another way of saying "that it is only in union with the Son that any

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8. Robert Grant, A Historical Introduction to the New Testament, p 154

9. Cf Fenton, *Op Cit*, p 27

man can come to any kind of union with the Father".<sup>10</sup>

John Fenton notes that this is the sixth of the 'I Am' sayings and that, in it, the language of movement is being used metaphorically and not as a literal description of what is about to happen. Thus, although it cannot be said literally that a person is a way (= road), it can be said that somebody is the means by which one person comes to another and this is what is meant by "I am the way". The addition of "and the truth and the life" is said to explain this:

"Jesus is the means by which men come to the Father  
(=believe in God and enter into communion with him)  
because he is the Mediator who imparts truth  
(= knowledge of God) and life (= participation in  
the life of God)."<sup>11</sup>

Both of these commentators show a common understanding of the text as stressing Jesus as the one and only way to the Father, which means salvation - knowledge of God and participation in the life of God. Is this knowledge and participation denied to those who are outside the reach of Christ?

In his comments on these words of John, C K Barrett seems to think that both knowledge and participation are denied to non-Christians:

"If John here and elsewhere used some of the  
notions and terminology of the religions of his  
day, and there are many indications that he was not

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10. Cf John Marsh, The Gospel of St John, p 504

11. Cf John Fenton, The Gospel According to John, p 152

unfamiliar with them, he was quite sure that those religions were ineffective and that there was no religious or mystical approach to God which could achieve its goal. No one has ascended into heaven but the Son of Man who came down from heaven (John 3,13); he alone is the link between God and man (John 1,15); and there is no access to God independent of him".<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, a New Testament scholar is telling us quite clearly what this verse is about. It is a reminder that all 'ways' to the Father, other than the way of Jesus, are ineffective. It is, of course, a statement about the religious environment of the first century Roman Empire. The strictures against other 'ways' are levelled at the prevailing philosophies and religions of the day - listed by Marsh as Platonism, Stoicism, the Hermetica, Gnosticism, the Mandaeans, the Mystery Religions and Judaism with all its sects and parties, such as the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Zealots, the Essenes, the Herodians and the Samaritans. This is a comprehensive list of 'ways' - and all of them are ruled out. So why should these same strictures not be levelled against the 'ways' of our own day - the religions and ideologies? Is there something different about the religions and ideologies of today's world that makes them immune from the strictures of John's words?

Kenneth Cracknell wants to believe that there is something, something different, and so he attempts an alternative exegesis of this verse.

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12. C K Barrett, The Gospel According to St John, SPCK, London, 1955, p 382

He begins by noting that the Prologue of John's Gospel says that all mankind is related to the pre-existent heavenly Logos:

"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world."<sup>13</sup>

He then tells us that according to William Temple, in his commentary on this verse;

"From the very beginning light has shone; it has always enlightened every man alive in his reason and his conscience. Every check on animal lust felt by the primitive savage, every stimulation to a nobler life, is God self-revealed within his soul. But God in self-revelation is the Divine Word, for precisely this is what the term means."<sup>14</sup>

Cracknell then goes on to argue that if all human beings have had some relation with the Divine Word before the Incarnation, "we are hardly to suppose that in the view of St John that relationship has now ended". On the contrary, the argument must now be "'how much more' are they likely to have a relation with him who is now risen and ascended."<sup>15</sup>

We are then told that the Risen and Ascended Christ stands in direct relationship to all things. The statement that he alone is the link between God and man still stands. There are, in other faiths, men and women who are, in biblical language, 'acceptable to God'. They must, therefore, have come to the Father through him, who is the way,

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13. John 1,9

14. William Temple, Readings in St John's Gospel, quoted in Kenneth Cracknell, Why Dialogue, p 21

15. Kenneth Cracknell, Why Dialogue? p 21

the truth and the life. The Risen and Ascended Christ is greater than the human Jesus. By this tortuous argument, then, we are assured that we have come to a formulation "satisfactory for the Christian in his or her own struggle to make sense of John 14,6."<sup>16</sup> This seems to be claiming too much. On the other hand, there does appear to be the possibility of some positive development in William Temple's view - that the light of God shines in every man and woman, to a greater or lesser degree. It shines most clearly in Jesus and those who walk by that light come most clearly and directly to God - they walk in 'the Way'.

The Report of the Board of Mission and Unity in the Church of England also wrestles with this verse. It, too, is anxious to come to a more positive interpretation, but it does so by a rather different route. The Report reminds us that the verse must be interpreted in context, which is that of the question asked by Thomas about how the disciples can know where Jesus is going and therefore know the way themselves. The answer given is that Jesus is going to the Father and, since they know him, they have no need to demand "Show us the Father". Thus, John is trying to assure the disciples that to have seen Jesus is to have seen nothing less than God, for God is perfectly reflected in Jesus, as the Prologue to the Gospel has made plain. The Report goes on to assure us that there is no suggestion in the context that Jesus is "the whole of God", that outside him there is no truth or life to be found. The main thrust is that in him are to be found the same truth and life which belong to the Father. When we read the text in this way there is no need to suppose that it is claiming that apart

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16. Kenneth Cracknell, Why Dialogue?, p 22



from Jesus there is neither truth nor life and that it is too limiting an interpretation to fit in with the rest of John's Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

This seems to be a much more natural and satisfactory interpretation than Cracknell's effort. But, at best, what it appears to be saying is that faiths and religions outside of Christianity are bearers of partial truth about God and are therefore only partial 'ways' to God. It is in Christ that we actually see God and, in that sense, he is the true way.

One commentator, writing about New Testament theology and the claims of other faiths, is critical of both 'exclusivist' and 'inclusivist' interpretations of the text. He claims that the interpretations offered are too static. He quotes from a Hindu commentator on the text:

"In John 14,6 Jesus claimed to be the way, the truth and the life. This was not in order to give people 'life' as they stood still, apart from the world, and held out their hands to receive. It was as people followed in the way, in the costly way of the cross, in taking a stance by renouncing riches, repaying frauds, or forgiving seventy times seven, that they would experience the life that was this stance and would sustain this stance."<sup>18</sup>

Sugden then goes on to comment that this quotation helps us to see

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17. Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue ..., CIO, London, 1984, p 23

18. Christopher Sugden, Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue, Grove Books, Nottingham, 1985, pp 10 & 11

that Jesus was not talking about intellectual, emotional or even spiritual apprehension of God, apart from costly commitment to his way of the cross. The first half of John 14,6 then, is about a commitment to discipleship in history, not about the way we apprehend spiritual truth about the existence or nature of God.<sup>19</sup>

What now seems clear is this: despite the efforts of those who search for a more positive interpretation of this text, the majority of interpreters appear to come down in favour of saying that the Evangelist's intention is to hold up Jesus as the way to the Father, in the midst of all the other possible ways.

## 2. "No Other Name?"

The second text we must consider is from the Acts of the Apostles:

Acts 4,12:

"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Taken at face value, this seems to be another text that says that salvation is uniquely to be found in Christ. There is no other possibility. But, as with the text from John's Gospel, we must ask about the context.

The book of the Acts is the second of two volumes written by the Evangelist Luke. The theme of Luke's work is the progress of the  
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19. Sugden, Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue, p12.

Gospel from its first beginnings to its arrival in the Gentile world. The Gospel as seen by Luke, is described in summary in the speeches he has inserted in Acts. It is not understood best as an apology addressed to a high Roman official, whoever Theophilus may have been, but Luke is writing for those who have a wide sympathy with Samaritans and Gentiles and who, like himself, see Christianity as a world religion.

Luke evidently sees himself as a historian, but many questions can be raised about his reliability as such. According to the German scholar Haenchen, in the first fifteen chapters of Acts, which are concerned mainly with the Jerusalem Church, Luke is producing an edifying sketch rather than history. In particular, we must note that the speeches and sermons are based on the Septuagint, and not on the Hebrew Bible. They therefore represent Luke's interests and not those of the early community.

These interests are two-fold. The time of the coming of the End was regarded as very near and the relation of the Gentile mission to the Jewish Law was under debate. Luke was concerned to provide his own answers to these questions. In the case of the coming of the End, he provides an answer by postponing it into an indefinite future. And, in the case of the Gentile mission, he answers by minimising, as much as much as possible, the differences between the Jews and the Gentiles.

G W H Lampe has described the theology of Luke as differing widely from that of Paul, yet holding in common with it the supreme

importance of the opening of the way of salvation to the Gentile world:

"The thought of the 'breaking down of the middle wall of partition' underlies the whole of Lucan theology".<sup>20</sup>

We are not surprised, therefore, to find that Luke, both in his Gospel and in Acts, strikes a note of universalism and finds a place in his story for outcasts, women and Samaritans.

The words of the text with which we are concerned come at the climax of a narrative running through Chapters 3 and 4 of the Acts. They arise from the healing of the man who had been lame from birth. Peter had said to the man, "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk".<sup>21</sup> In the text under consideration he is still discussing the meaning and purpose of the deed with the Jewish authorities. At face value, he appears to be saying to the Jewish authorities that this man was healed by the power of Jesus, and that, in like manner, men can be saved by the same power of the same Jesus. And not only that, but that it is solely through the power of Jesus that they can be saved.

When it comes to seeking a wider interpretation of this text, therefore, we find, not surprisingly, that much of the discussion revolves around the significance and meaning of the word translated into 'salvation'. Kenneth Cracknell, for example, bases his case for a wide and sympathetic interpretation on the fact that the word

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20. G W H Lampe, Acts, in the New Peake's Commentary, p 882 ff

21. Acts 3,6

rendered into 'salvation' can also be translated as 'healing'. If this is done we then have a reading of the verse as follows:

"And there is no healing in anyone else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be healed."

Lampe supports this contention in his commentary by saying that the word has a double meaning - healing and salvation.<sup>22</sup>

So, for Cracknell, this verse is not about salvation at all. It is about healing. Healing is one aspect of salvation, but it is not the whole of it. It is certainly not enough on which to base an exclusivist doctrine of other faiths. And again, Cracknell is supported in this by the views of G W H Lampe:

"These words should be read in the proper context of Luke's re-construction of the anti-Jewish polemic of the early church and not generalised beyond that context."<sup>23</sup>

The Report of the Board for Mission and Unity takes much the same line as Cracknell and reminds us that whatever we may make of the salvation/healing issue, John Robinson has reminded us that the context of the verse is not one of comparative religion. In other words, we are being told once more that we must not ask the text the questions that it cannot answer.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Cf Lampe, Acts, in New Peake's Commentary on the Bible, p 892

23. G W H Lampe, God as Spirit, quoted in Why Dialogue?, p 22

24. Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue ..., p 23

In this case, the question does seem to revolve around the issue of salvation/healing. So, for some the text is about salvation, while for others it is about healing. But, for one writer, at least, healing is a sign of salvation and so the two become synonymous:

"The healing is for Peter an evidence of the resurrection .... Peter proclaims Jesus far more than a healer. Everything associated with the Jewish expectation of the Messiah is to be found in Jesus."<sup>25</sup>

Interpretations of these exclusivist sayings seem to be marked by special pleading, arguments from silence and demands for more detailed and closer examination of the context. What are we to make of them? Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether or not the problem of people of other faiths is not unique among theological problems confronting the Christian community today. In other words, it is at least honest to recognise that there is nothing in the whole Bible that corresponds to this problem. All texts are therefore only relevant to the topic by dint of distortion.

We shall leave the last word with Wesley Ariarajah, who has the following points to make about all statements made in the New Testament about the uniqueness of Christ:

First of all, he points out that the excessive emphasis on only in the New Testament is part of the early Christian polemic against the Jews, from whom the Christians were growing away as a separate

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25. Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue, p 12

community. In other words, the New Testament writers always want to emphasise the differences between the Christian faith and the old faith of Judaism.

Secondly, he reminds us that part of the development of the Christian church was a shift from the theocentric attitude that characterised the teaching of Jesus himself. Gradually, Jesus became the centre of faith, around which everything else revolved. The Doctrine of the Trinity was actually developed to provide a framework of understanding for developing beliefs about Jesus Christ.

Finally, he reminds us that exclusive statements about Christ can never be understood unless we recognise the different levels of language being used. The language of the Bible is the language of faith. When we speak about Jesus as 'the only way' we are expressing a relationship that has profound significance for us. The problem comes when we turn this expression of experience into an absolute claim about truth and use it as a measure by which to judge the truth-claims of others, who are speaking from a different perspective.<sup>26</sup>

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26. The Bible and People of Other Faiths, pp 24 & 26

## CHAPTER 4:

### SOME VOICES FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

During the first three centuries of the existence of the Christian Church there was a series of waves of popular anger against it. This anger reached its climax in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (121 - 180) and was accompanied by serious attacks on the intellectual position of the Church. The first of these attacks was instituted by a satirical writer, Lucian of Samosata, whose view of the Christians was that they were "credulous, fanatical, and bound together by the fact that they had rejected the Greek gods, simpletons perhaps, but none the less dangerous".<sup>1</sup>

Thirteen years later, another provincial wrote a thoughtful and thoroughgoing attack on Christianity. He was Celsus, who was not a satirist but a serious writer, who had taken the trouble to read many Christian books. To Celsus, the real charge against the Christians was their lack of civic sense and dis-loyalty to the Empire, while still enjoying the benefits of its rule. But Celsus also indicated the weakness in Christianity which he believed to have led to these anti-social views. The radical error of both Judaism and Christianity, he felt, was that they separated man from the rest of the creation, an error which he traced back to their false ideas of God. Celsus was a Platonist. He therefore conceived of God as the First Cause, the Good and the Beautiful, but only dimly intelligible to the human mind. From the point of view of Celsus' Platonism, God could certainly not descend to earth in the form of man, for that

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1. W H C Frend, The Early Church, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1965, p 73



would bring him into contact with mortality and death, and that was a contradiction in terms.

During the latter half of the second century, therefore, the orthodox Christians had to fight on two fronts. They had to try to convince middle-class provincial opinion that the charges of atheism, cannibalism, and so on, which were being levelled against them, were untrue. They also had to disprove Gnostic claims that Christian perfection had no need of an exclusive attitude towards the world, or a Church organisation. It was partly to meet these needs that there came into existence the Christian Apologetic movement of the second century.

The earliest of the apologies to have survived is the work of a certain Aristides of Athens, dating from around 140. This is a work which sets out to prove that the ancient civilised peoples: the Greeks, the Chaldeans and the Egyptians, had no genuine knowledge of God. It also deals with the Jews, charging them with corrupting monotheism and sound moral teaching by angel worship and various rituals. It finally claims that Christians alone possess the truth and live according to the commandments.<sup>2</sup>

The work is obviously a fairly crude attack on non-Christians, with an equally crude attempt to justify the Christian faith. It was only a decade later that Justin wrote his Apology, in Rome, and addressed it to Antoninus Pius and his philosopher son, Marcus Aurelius. With Justin, however, we move away from crudity and into the realm of the

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2. H Leitzmann, A History of the Early Church, Volume III, The Founding of the Church Universal, Lutterworth, London, 1961, p 177 & 178

classic apologist, for Justin is a philosopher. He has the normal polemic against polytheism and mythology, but he represents them as being the work of demons, whose false game has now been discovered and the truth brought clearly to light by the coming of Christ. The trustworthiness of Christ is guaranteed by the fulfilment of prophecies.

The significance of the Apologists for the theology of other faiths lies in their development of the doctrine of the divine Logos. We have seen that John, in his Gospel, used the Logos concept for two reasons: to set forth Jesus as the Revealer of God and the Saviour of mankind, the argument being that the active reason of God, which was his agent at the creation of the world, is also the light that enlightens every man. Every human life is related to God through its creation and its illumination by the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

The Apologists now developed this doctrine. They taught that the Logos was active everywhere and from the beginning of everything. The Logos was therefore "logos spermatikos", the seminal word. As the agent of God, the Logos was the divine principle of reality everywhere. Man, who is created in the image of God, participates in the Logos through the medium of rationality. This participation, however, is only a matter of degree, because it has been distorted by sin. The Christian Gospel is that the whole Logos of God was perfectly manifested in Jesus Christ. The more faithfully a person followed the leading of the Logos in his life and thought, therefore, the more approximately he came to the perfection of humanity in

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3. See above p 38

Christ.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this kind of theology, Justin was able to write:

"It is our belief that those men who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share in his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good for all men."<sup>5</sup>

And this meant, in turn, that Justin could claim some of the greater so-called 'pagans' and higher aspects of 'pagan religion' as precursors of Christian life and faith:

"We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably (according to the Logos) are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists: as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like that."<sup>6</sup>

It was the key shift of the identification of Jesus with the Logos which enabled Justin to include the religious life of all mankind within the Christian dispensation. Jesus is Saviour, not only of the Christians, but of the Jews and the Gentiles within their own traditions and religions. Thus, the Apologists insisted on both the antiquity and the coherence of Christian teaching. They asserted that Christianity was not new and revolutionary and that there was a unity between the Old and New Testaments in that Jesus fulfilled the  
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4. Owen C Thomas (Ed), Attitudes to Other Religions, SCM, London, 1969, p 17

5. Justin Martyr, First Apology, quoted in Thomas, p 17

6. Justin Martyr, First Apology, quoted in Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, SCM, London, 1983, p 42 & 43

Jewish prophecies. The truths of Christianity, according to Justin, were older than all the writers who ever lived. In this way, he is able to say that Plato partook of the truth only in part and that he was an ally in pointing to the true philosophy of Christ.

It was the Logos doctrine which served as a model for later forms of Christian thinking about other religions:

"It is an approach which enables Christians to perceive positive elements as well as distortions in other religions, to see other religions as preparations for the Christian gospel, and to present the Christian faith as the fulfilment of other faiths."<sup>7</sup>

Geoffrey Wainwright has written of the influence of this view as being both widespread and malign, but others have seen it as a most useful theological tool with which to approach the thorny problem of other religions. Wainwright says:

"Then: the inclusivist attitude. It is found as early as Justin Martyr, who held that the Greeks who had lived 'according to the Logos' were in fact Christians 'avant la lettre'. In our own day it has been represented by Paul Tillich's 'latent Church', Karl Rahner's 'anonymous Christianity', and Raymond Panikkar's 'Unknown Christ of Hinduism'. For all their generosity, such views will strike even well-disposed adherents of other

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7. Thomas, Attitudes to other Religions, p 17

faiths as Christian imperialism by dint of unwanted annexation."<sup>8</sup>

It is this "Christian Imperialism by dint of unwanted annexation" which strikes the modern reader of Justin (and of all those who pursue similar theological trails today). The implications of the identification of Jesus with the Logos are that whatever truth and goodness may be discerned in non-Christian faiths are partial and incomplete compared with the fullness and goodness which as given in Christ. Another way of expressing the same truth for some of the early Apologists was to say that mankind was undergoing a process of education in preparation for the presence of the Logos in Christ. Greek philosophy had acted as a schoolmaster in the education of minds to dispose them towards Christ, just as the Law had acted as a schoolmaster for the Jews - (see Galatians 3,24). There is then no limit to what may be included 'in Christ'.

This extrapolation from the Logos doctrine leads Hans Küng to ask, therefore:

"But if the pagans Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, or later - for others - even Marx and Freud could also be 'pedagogues' leading men to Christ, why not also the philosophers and religious thinkers of other nations? Does not the East offer forms of thought and organisation, structures and models, within which Christianity could be conceived and lived just as easily as in Western forms?"<sup>9</sup>

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8. Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology, a Systematic Theology, Epworth, London, 1980, p 144

9. Hans Küng, On Being a Christian, Fount, 1978, p 113

The logical conclusion of the Logos doctrine, therefore, seems to be the inclusion of all men and women, of whatever race or creed, in the realm of God's saving grace.

Charles Davis has neatly summed up the problems involved with the Logos doctrine. He notes that the supreme exaltation of Christ, as outlined for example in Colossians, implies a universal and active presence throughout creation and in the whole history. This gives the foundation for a Logos doctrine as it was developed by Justin. It is along these lines that the possibility of a Christian universalism lies. The work of Christ can then be seen in all religions. But, the exalted Christ is the same Jesus who died on the cross for our sins and rose again for our justification. This is the Good News, which is the power of God saving all who have faith. How, then, can men be saved unless they hear the name of the man Jesus and his saving work and have faith in his name?

"The historical particularity of Jesus, Lord and Christ, is the source of Christian exclusiveness."<sup>10</sup>

If we move away from the Apologists we find that it is the theme of historical particularity which begins to come to the fore in theology. So, for example, Irenaeus (ca 130 - 200) was influenced by Justin but, whereas Justin is known mainly as an Apologist, Irenaeus is known only through his writings intended for the Church. He wrote a good deal but only two of his works have survived. These are

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10. Charles Davis, Christ and the World's Religions, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1970, p 40 & 41

Against the Heresies and the much shorter Proof of the Apostolic Preaching. There are two significant elements in his thought. He rested his case on the unity of the Old Testament and the revelation in Christ. He expounded this as a theory of recapitulation. He said that Christ had summed up, or recapitulated, in himself the long line of the human race. So that, what we had lost in Adam - the being and image of God - we regained in Christ. Secondly, this teaching was worked out in opposition to the Gnostic claim to have access to some secret and unwritten tradition. Irenaeus therefore worked out a Canon of the four Gospels and presented the Christian message as the simple form of the Bible story. He also vindicated the faith of the Church by appealing to the Apostolic tradition transmitted through the bishops. Thus, he reminded the Church that Christianity is never simply a philosophy, but that it rests on a revelation attested by sacred writings and guardians of the Apostolic witness. There is not much in Irenaeus, therefore, that might include a positive place for those outside of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-215), on the other hand, was a writer who tried to give some philosophical as well as scriptural grounds for what he had to say. Indeed, he asserts that there is no irreconcilable difference between philosophy and scripture. The classical philosophers and the prophets of the Old Testament stand in line as pioneers of the truth that was finally revealed in Christ. No people was ever utterly forsaken by providence. He also says:

"The One, True God is the sole author of all  
beauty, whether it is Hellenic or whether it is

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11. Cf Hans Van Campenhausen, The Fathers of the Greek Church, A & C Black, London, 1963, p 16-24

ours."

Clement therefore strove deliberately to reach out beyond basic attitudes, which extolled Christianity as a religion on its own, towering above paganism and Judaism alike. He saw Christianity as newness of life from a new Being which is perfect above all former ways of life, beyond rationalism and morality. It is also the crown of all culture and religion. Van Campenhausen says that Clement was the least ecclesiastical of the Fathers of the Church. His great achievement was that he saved the Church from alienation from the intellectual climate of the day. He sought to work out a synthesis of Christian thought and Greek philosophy, and paved the way for his pupil Origen.<sup>12</sup>

Before turning to Origen, however, it will be necessary to look at the teaching of Clement's contemporary in the Western Church, Tertullian. He was born about the middle of the second century at Carthage and trained there and in Rome as a lawyer. There are three main themes to his writing. First of all, he has an apologetic concern. His greatest work was his Apology written in 197. In it he sought to counter the strong feeling against Christianity which led to the persecuting edict of the Emperor in 202. He dismissed the charges of atheism and immorality laid at the door of the Christians; he claimed that they were good citizens, paying their taxes and obeying all just order; he laid bare the emptiness of polytheism and declared that pagan philosophy was vain. Above all, he saw no common ground between philosopher and Christian, between "Athens and Jerusalem, Academy and Church". Secondly, therefore, he has a

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12. See Van Campenhausen, p 25-36



doctrinal and polemical concern. He attacked Marcion as the most dangerous enemy of the Church. In this he leaned upon the argument that the Catholic Church had received its Scriptures and its teaching direct from the Apostles. The true faith is therefore that which is preached everywhere. In his attack on Monarchianism he contributed to the vocabulary of Western Trinitarian thought. But, thirdly, he is also practical in his concerns. He wrote to encourage those facing martyrdom and issued works on prayer, penance and chastity. In his argument with Callistus, Bishop of Rome, about the treatment of penitent sinners and their possible restoration in the Church, he took the severe line. The Church must be without spot and must be separated from the world. Thus, Tertullian was the embodiment of a Western spirit. He was practical and non-speculative in his thinking and was inclined to social issues and legalism rather than spirituality and mysticism. He forms a fascinating contrast with Clement, who embodies the Greek mind at its best.<sup>13</sup>

Tertullian's emphasis on the Church and the necessity for it to keep separate from the world means, of course, that there is not much comfort to be found in his writings by anyone trying to write an inclusivist Christian theology of other faiths. The Church, in his view, is for the elect. There is no room for compromise with the world. It is to the tradition of Clement that we must return, therefore, and especially to the work of his great pupil, Origen.

Origen (ca 185-255) was incomparably the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern Church in the early centuries. He was born  
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13. Cf Hans Van Campenhausen, Fathers of the Latin Church, A & C Black, London, 1964, p 4-36

in Alexandria and given the best Christian education then available. At the early age of seventeen he was made head of a catechetical school, but he soon gave up this elementary work and moved on to the teaching of the higher pupils. His success as a teacher was unparalleled and he attracted pupils from far and wide, both orthodox and heretical. In other ways his life was less successful. In particular he incurred the displeasure of his Bishop, Demetrius, who had him condemned and banished. Despite his celebrity as a scholar, he was imprisoned during the persecution of Decius and cruelly tortured, which left him physically broken. He died in about 255.

Origen's literary output was prodigious. He was a biblical scholar who broke new ground in his studies. He produced the famous Hexapla, an edition of the Old Testament text in six parallel columns. This provided the manuscript basis of all his exegetical work. For Origen there were three levels of meaning to be discovered in the Bible - the literal, the moral and the spiritual. To us this may seem odd, but, in his day, it was probably the only way of defending the scriptures against attack.

Origen was also a theological writer of power and originality. In his work De Principiis he expounded a coherent system of Christian teaching about God and the Universe. For Origen, God was the Absolute Being of Plato, though in place of the passive qualities of beauty and goodness he asserted the active quality of love. This was manifested in the Son, ever-begotten, co-eternal with God, yet different from God. The Holy Spirit was the first of the beings created by God. From this it will be seen that Origen has, justly,

been described by Christian systematic theologians as a subordinationist, giving to God the Father a priority and a dominion not exercised by the Son and the Spirit.

For our purposes, Origen's teaching about the Universe is more interesting. He taught that there was a world of spirits who became sated with the adoration of God and fell, by their neglect, turning away from God to what is inferior. The material world was then created by God as a realm where man, who was involved in the Fall, might be educated and trained and turned back to his Maker. To this end Christ, the divine Logos, came into the world to be man's guide and educator. The universe will then end as it began. At the last evil will be conquered and all beings will return to their primitive state. We shall then attain complete conformity with God and reach the stage where God will be all in all.

Even more interesting is Origen's major apologetic work, which he wrote against the teaching of Celsus and therefore called Contra Celsum. His main arguments are that the case for Christianity rests on its strength displayed in the moral reformation of mankind; that the Christian faith gives what philosophy only promises, and gives it to all, not just those with the intelligence and intellectual equipment to receive it. Origen is therefore a theologian with universalist tendencies, the one who, more than any other, was able to combine the unphilosophical tradition of the Church with the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic tendencies of the century, into a complete theological structure.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Van Campenhausen, Fathers of the Greek Church, p 37-57

This survey of some voices from the Early Church leaves us with similar sorts of conclusions at those to be drawn from looking at the Old Testament and New Testament material. There are two lines of thought which may be applied to thinking about the Christian theology of other faiths. One takes its source from the work of Justin and the Apologists and emphasises the divine light which is for all. This line also sees positive merit in the work of so-called 'pagan' philosophers, which is seen as a sort of schoolmaster before Christ. Fulfilment theories of the status of other faiths can be constructed along this line of development. The other line is that which stresses the uniqueness of the Church and the necessity for the Church to remain separate from the world. This is seen most clearly in Tertullian, who stresses the particularity of Christ and the exclusiveness of Christianity. In Origen we see something of an attempt to synthesise the two, but not with any great success.

## CHAPTER 5 :

### DIALOGUE - A SUBMERGED THEME

The Mediaeval Period falls into three parts. The first, usually known as 'The Dark Ages', covers the centuries from the fall of the Western Empire to the recovery of the philosophy of Aristotle. In terms of the history of Christian doctrine, it takes us from the age of Augustine, through the rise of Islam and into the age of Aquinas. It was a time when Christianity encountered other faiths, but when dialogue with these faiths was a submerged theme.

Outwardly, this period was one of stress and strain caused by the upheaval of a world broken in pieces. Viewed from within, the period was marked by superstition and terror. Only in the Church did some find any groundwork of authority and any element of order. Of the great heritage of Greek thought almost nothing survived in the West, though the eclipse was not total in the East.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was the greatest of the Fathers of the Latin Church. Justin had spoken of the seminal word and this theme was continued with Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch and Athenagoras. All of them subscribed to some form of Logos theology, in which it is asserted that all those who live by the Logos are already Christians, even though they have never heard of Jesus. The same point had also been made by Tertullian with his idea of 'the naturally Christian soul'. Now, Augustine also seems to continue the theme with his idea of 'Ecclesia a Justo Abel' - Abel was the first just man and, after him, every just man belonged to Christ and the Church. Here, then, there is an inclusivist and

universalist note in Augustine.

But, Augustine also said that only in Christian teaching did he hear that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". Augustine had made a pilgrimage through all the religions on offer in his world, and discarded them all. The attraction of the Christian faith was to be found in the Incarnation of Christ. It is with the subsequent thought of Augustine that the balance began to shift in Christian doctrine towards and exclusivity and grace within the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Paul Knitter suggests a number of reasons for this shift from inclusivism to exclusivism and Augustine's key role in it:

1. First, he reminds us that under Emperor Theodosius (379-395) Christianity became the official State religion. There was now no need for Christian theologians to argue their beliefs and the reasonableness of their doctrine before 'pagan' rulers and 'pagan' philosophers. For the time being, at least, the age of the apologist was over.

2. Secondly, therefore, Christianity became Christendom, and the enemies of the Empire became the enemies of the Church. The so-called 'barbarous pagans' and their religions were therefore seen as opponents of all that the Church stood for.

3. Thirdly, and probably more importantly, there was the theological controversy with Pelagianism. Pelagius held that salvation was possible through human effort. Augustine led the counter-attack and, as is often the case in theological argument, went to the other extreme. So, in order to stress the necessity of grace, Augustine

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1. Cf Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, p 48

tended to limit it. In his thinking, 'humanity lost without grace' came to be equated with 'the pagans and their religions'. Thus, Augustine came to his doctrine of double-predestination, that God predestines some to salvation and others to damnation, from all eternity.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this exclusivist tradition, which has weighed heavily on the history of Christian thinking about other faiths, there is one point about Augustine that needs to be borne in mind. Hans Küng reminds us that he used a term for God which had its roots in Greek philosophy and which we still meet in Eastern religions. Following the analysis of F Heiler in Prayer, a Study in the History and Psychology of Religion, he reminds us that:

"the God of the mystic is, therefore, the Highest Good, the 'Summum Bonum', a term which was coined by Plotinus following Plato and which, through Augustine, became most frequently used as descriptive of God. It meets us also in the Song of Songs of Indian mysticism, the Bhagavadgita, nay, even in the 'Tao-teh-king' of Lao-tsze".<sup>3</sup>

The appearance of Islam in the seventh century affected Christianity in many ways. Founded by Muhammad, Islam is based on a simple profession of faith, "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the apostle of God". The idea of entire surrender to the will of God pervades everything in Islam. There are five simple and basic duties

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2. Paul Knitter, No Other Name?, SCM, London, 1985, p 122

3. Cf Hans Küng, Does God Exist?, Fount, London, 1980, p 606

to be done: in addition to the profession of faith, the five times daily prayer ritual, almsgiving, fasting in the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The result of all this is a basic equality of all people before God and a very strong sense of community. In turn, this means a sense of mission.

The spread of Islam was rapid and immense. Once the Arab tribes had been united by Muhammad's monotheism their progress was astonishing. By 650 the ancient empire of Persia had been destroyed. Jerusalem fell in 638 and Caesarea in 640. Thus, both Palestine and Syria came under Muslim domination. In 642 Alexandria was captured and it was not long before the whole of Egypt was added to the Muslim domain. The advance in Africa also continued. In 697 Carthage was seized. By 715 the greater part of Spain was in Muslim hands. The only check to this rapid expansion came in 732 when a Muslim army was defeated at Tours in the heart of France. Elsewhere, however, the advance continued. Rome was sacked by 846 and by 942 Sicily was a Muslim country. In Asia Minor the Muslim armies began that relentless pressure on the Eastern Roman Empire, resisted doggedly by Christian forces, until Constantinople at last fell to the Turks in 1453 and over a thousand years of Christendom came to an end.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars are not all agreed about the significance of this rapid expansion. The traditional Christian position is that the appearance of Islam was an unmitigated disaster for Christianity. But, as Stephen Neill points out, despite the fact that there were occasional massacres and a steady, casual loss of life, the actual numbers of

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4. Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions, Pelican, London, 1964, pp 61-63



Christians killed by Muslims were surprisingly small. Christians lived on, as Christians, and in some cases, managed to attain to high office.<sup>5</sup>

Another result of the rise of Islam was to be seen in terms of Christianity's self-understanding and role in the world. In particular, whilst the lights of learning were going out one by one in Western Europe, a richer civilisation than anything found in Rome was flourishing in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Cordova and in Constantinople. Thus, between the eighth and eleventh centuries - the Dark Ages of Western Europe - Arabian culture flourished, assimilating the learning both of the East and of Ancient Greece. The Arabs put mathematics on a sound basis. They invented algebra and plane and spherical geometry. They also improved such knowledge of chemistry as men had at that time; and they freed both chemistry and physics from metaphysics and magic. Above all, from the point of view of the history of ideas, and the development of Christian doctrine, they assimilated and preserved the great heritage of Greek thought, and particularly the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato as harmonised by Neoplatonism.

What the Arabian philosopher/theologians tried to do was to make the religious ideas of Islam understandable and acceptable to intellectuals. They did this by bending the philosophy of Aristotle to the service of theology, harmonising the concepts of reason with revealed truth. In other words, we have here a Muslim Apologetic movement. The ablest of the Arab philosopher/theologians was most

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5. Ibid p 63-64

probably Avicenna, but the most influential was Averroes, not so much an original thinker, but the author of an elaborate commentary on the whole works of Aristotle.

During the Crusades - in 1204 - the Greek manuscripts of Aristotle's writings were transferred from Constantinople to Paris. Until then, Western thinkers had only translations of Averroes' commentary to work on. Now, the manuscripts were translated into Latin under the direction of Thomas Aquinas. Thus, after lying hidden from the West for nigh on four centuries, Aristotle's thought came to the fore again, via Islam, and into the hands of a formidable man. For, with the work of Thomas Aquinas, we see the greatest influence of Greek thought on mediaeval theology.

Until Aquinas began his work Christian thinking had been largely influenced by Neo-Platonism, through the work of Augustine, But, for Aquinas, Neo-Platonism did not provide a satisfactory ideological framework for theology. It separated spirit and matter, it entirely subordinated reason to faith and it introduced a constant tendency to regard nature as evil. All of these elements have obvious implications for the Christian theology of other faiths, and all of them are negative. Now, Aquinas began his work, using Aristotle for his ideological framework. For the first time since the rise of Augustine we find a theologian who has something positive to say about other faiths, because he has something positive to say about Islam.

The theology of Aquinas rejects the notion that evil or sin is rooted

in the body or the material world. If things of the body can be misused, then so can things of the spirit. In fact, none of them is bad in itself. They are all capable of holy, or unholy, usage. Along the same line of thought, Aquinas also rejected that Platonic view that intellectual knowledge does not take place through the operation of sensible objects on the intellect. Forms and general ideas are found in things, and are not separate entities apprehended by the intellect.

Aquinas believed that there are two sources of man's knowledge of God. The first is natural theology, which formulates those truths that can be reached by the power of un-aided reason. Such truths are held to be accessible to 'pagans' as well as Christians. For example, Aquinas believed that the Platonists and Stoics were aware of these truths. But, Aquinas also believed that this type of knowledge does not give man all that he needs to know about God, which is saving knowledge. So, he goes on to speak about this second type of knowledge under the heading of revealed theology. This is that full and saving knowledge of God which is expressed in such doctrines as those of the Incarnation, the Trinity and Redemption. These doctrines can only be learned from the Bible. They cannot be found outside of Christianity in other faiths.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, while Aquinas had some positive things to say about Islam, and by implication about other faiths, he belonged very much to the tradition of "no salvation outside of the Church". It has always to be remembered that he wrote two Summas. One, theological and

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6. Cf Hans Küng, Does God Exist?, p 35

philosophical, for the Christian faith - Summa Theologiae. And a second, philosophical and theological, against the Arabs and 'the pagans' - Summa Contra Gentiles.<sup>7</sup>

In the Mediaeval period, then, the theme of dialogue with other faiths is a submerged one. Augustine sets the scene by emphasising the exclusivist tendencies in Christian thinking. The rise of Islam leads to encounter, not to say confrontation, with one particular faith. The importance of the rise of Islam, however, lies much more in the intellectual stimulus it gives to Thomas Aquinas. But he, in turn, sees it as something to be written and preached against. The exclusivist tendency again holds sway.

During the period of the Renaissance there was little thought given to other religions. Paul Knitter, in his survey of Christian attitudes to other religions, states that this ignoring of others was total with the one notable exception of Nicholas of Cusa, a Renaissance thinker and cardinal of the Catholic Church (d 1464).<sup>8</sup> Nicholas of Cusa's contribution to the theology of other faiths is found in his book De Pace Fidei, (The Peace between the Different Forms of Faith). In it he imagines a conversation in heaven between the representatives of the great religions when the divine Logos explains their unity:

"There is only one religion, only one cult of all  
who are living according to the principles of  
Reason (the Logos-Reason), which underlies the

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7. Hans Küng, Does God Exist?, p 35

8. Cf Paul Knitter, No Other Name?, pp 248-249

different rites .... The cults of the gods  
everywhere witnesses to Divinity .... So in the  
heaven of Logos (Reason) the concord of religions  
was established."<sup>9</sup>

This is an interesting quotation for two reasons. First, because it contains a reference to the argument for the existence of God from the existence of religion - "the cult of the gods everywhere witnesses to Divinity". But, secondly, because it also contains the idea of One, True Religion. Nicholas held that behind all the outward forms and different practices of the religious traditions of the world there is, in fact, one universal religion, on which Jews and Christians and Muslims can agree. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Nicholas intended this One, True Religion to be his own religion - Catholic Christianity. Nevertheless, as Alan Race points out, Nicholas' vision was a ray of light at a time when the crusading spirit was still very much the dominant one in the Church. It exhibited the spirit of tolerance, which was the spirit of the Renaissance, and it anticipated the spirit of the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the Reformation saw the re-discovery of neglected biblical themes:

"In this epoch-making controversy, the Reformers  
considered themselves to be, without exception, the  
true disciples of Augustine. They saw their

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9. Cited in Paul Tillich, Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions, Columbia Press, 1963, p 40

10. Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, p 71

struggle against the Roman theory of justification by works, the glorification of the Church and the Renaissance papacy as a continuation of Augustine's passionate struggle against Pelagianism, which had expressed human works at the expense of God's grace. According to Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers, man gains certainty, the certainty of his salvation, not by all the prescribed and recommended pious works but "by faith alone" (*sola fide*), which corresponds to "by grace alone" (*sola gratia*). This, they claimed, was the authentic teaching of Paul on man's justification and also the teaching of Augustine."<sup>11</sup>

It is important to understand, then, that the Reformers were themselves standing in a direct line from Paul, and through Augustine. As we have already noted, Paul was not at his clearest when writing on the topic of the possibility of salvation for the Jews, and his whole theology was influenced by the experience on the Damascus Road, which made him a Christ-mystic. Augustine was the thinker who made the exclusivist theme the dominant one in Christian theology. Thus, when it comes to looking at the Reformers for any new thoughts on the subject of other faiths we find that where they thought about it at all they applied the doctrine of Paul to the problem.

John Calvin (1509-1564) has a view of other religions which is based  
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11. Hans Küng, Does God Exist?, p 70

on Paul's teaching in the Epistle to the Romans. God has planted a sense of the Divine, and therefore a seed of religion, in all men. He has showed himself in the glories of creation and in the experience of man. But, because he is a sinner, man does not always see this evidence of God, and is led astray. He makes idols for himself and is corrupted. The result of all this is that the seed of religion has grown into falsehood and superstition. In 'the tree of religion', therefore, only the Christian branch is the true branch. All the other branches are false, in some sense.<sup>12</sup>

Martin Luther (1483-1546) also followed Paul, except that he laid emphasis on the aspect of his thought which is usually described as the idea of 'justification by faith'. Luther believed that all religion is an attempt by man to justify himself before God. So, the phenomena of the religions, we find moral achievement, cultic rite, and ascetic discipline, and they are all attempts to impress God. Against this, Luther set the idea of justification by faith in the grace of God, which is proclaimed in the Christian Gospel, and only in the Christian Gospel. So, as Stephen Neill points out, the idea of the steady progress of the Gospel throughout the world, as a result of the preaching of Christians, is not foreign to his thought.

On the other hand, Luther could also say some surprisingly savage things about Jews and Turks. He called Jews 'poisonous, bitter worms' and said 'their synagogues should be set on fire'. He is also credited with saying that 'the faith of Jews, Turks and Papists is all one thing', which is neither accurate, nor likely to have

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12. Cf Owen Thomas, Attitudes to Other Religions, pp 18-19

endeared him to any of the parties concerned. But, Neill also reminds us, that when the town council of Basel forbade the publication of Theodore Bibliander's translation of the Qur'an, in 1542, it was Luther, supported by Strasbourg theologians, who led the appeal which changed the council's mind. This is most likely the event referred to by Kenneth Cragg, when he tells us that Luther 'fostered a translation of the Qur'an'. In addition to all this, Owen Thomas reminds us that Luther made a special study of Islam and edited a German translation of the Qur'an. Whether this was in addition to fostering a translation is not clear, but what does seem clear is that Luther was interested in Islam and that he did have something to do with a translation of the Qur'an into German. What is also clear is his motive. He wished Christendom to know "what an accursed, shameful and desperate book it is"! So, he was hardly interested in Islam for its own sake, nor could he be accused of studying the Qur'an for spiritual enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

With Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) we find an entirely different approach to the problem from that of the Reformers. Lord Herbert is usually held to be the founder of Deism, although the movement did not flourish under that name until a century later. In the face of conflicting religious doctrines, on the one hand, and the early beginnings of the new scientific scepticism, on the other, Herbert sought to establish a new theory of knowledge and a criterion for the determination of truth. His work is, therefore, an original blending of scholastic logic and 16th century Neo-Platonism. He

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13. Cf Thomas, Attitudes Toward Other Religions, p 18 & 19; Kenneth Cragg, The Christian and Other Religion, Mowbrays, London, 1977, p 8; Neill, A History of Christian Missions, p 222



defines truth as the conformity of a mental faculty with an object under certain conditions. The mental faculties he classifies under four headings:

1. Natural Instinct
2. Internal Apprehension
3. External Apprehension
4. Discursive Thought (Reason)

The faculty of Natural Instinct yields the truth of intellect, the content of which is the Common Notions and these, in turn, are the final court of appeal for our beliefs.

As a corollary to this theory of knowledge, Herbert then tried to state five Common Notions upon which every religion is founded. He believed that all religions are essentially the same, but he regarded Christianity as the best of all, because it accords most clearly with the ideas of the Common Notions. According to Lord Herbert, the five Common Notions of Religion are:

1. There is a God.
2. This God ought to be worshipped.
3. That virtue and piety are necessary for worship.
4. That men ought to repent of their sins.
5. That there are rewards and punishments in a future life.

The main difficulty with Herbert's view, then, becomes apparent: the modern study of religions has shown that they are not all the same. These common notions do not necessarily occur in all of the religious traditions of the world, as we have now come to know and understand them. Despite this difficulty, Herbert's scheme suggests the possibility of a scientific study of religion. In our own day,

scholars such as D W Gundry and Ninian Smart have, in their own way, attempted to seek out and describe the common dimensions of religion<sup>14</sup>.

The most influential Protestant theologian of the nineteenth century was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who opened up a new era of Protestant thought and is rightly known as the father of liberal theology. In his Speeches on Religion Schleiermacher is concerned with what he sees as a misunderstanding of religion which has grown up. The natural religion of the Enlightenment (and the religion of Deism) would have us believe that religion is a set of rational doctrines and moral theories about God and freedom and immortality. What has been forgotten in all this, according to Schleiermacher, is the longing of the human heart for communion with the Universe and the Infinite, or God. Thus, religion cannot be reduced to metaphysics, doctrine, morals or science. It is largely a matter of man's experience of the Infinite in everything. The seat of religion is therefore in feeling, or an apprehension of what is beyond the self.

On the basis of this analysis, Schleiermacher was able to assert that real religion is only found in the positive or historical faiths of mankind. Also, because the very nature of religion is that it is the manifestation of the Infinite in the finite, it can only be encompassed in all the religions. In each religion one relation of man to the Infinite is placed at the centre. In Christianity, the emphasis is on redemption and this means that Christianity is the

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14. There is more discussion of this on pp 1-15.

highest form of religion. Yet, Christianity does not seek to be the only religion, but is willing to see other forms of religion produced outside of itself.

In The Christian Faith, Schleiermacher carried these lines of thought further. He defined religion as 'the feeling of absolute dependence', which is a consciousness of being in relation to God. The various religions are arranged in a scale of development, moving from idol-worship upwards, through polytheism, and finally to monotheism. Of the three examples of monotheism extant in the world, Islam represents the aesthetic type, while Judaism and Christianity represent the ethical or teleological type. But since, according to Schleiermacher, Judaism is a less perfect form, because it contains elements of idol-worship and is in the process of extinction, then Christianity remains "the most perfect of the most highly developed forms of religion". What he has to say about Judaism is wrong and prejudiced, yet Schleiermacher's interpretation of religion and his attitude to other faiths is interesting because it combines elements of a number of approaches. He defines the essence of religion as being in feeling. He also places all religions on a scale of development. He believes that religions other than Christianity are not false, since all religions contain some relation of truth and an obscure awareness of God. He also began the first phase of liberal theology in Protestant thought, a phase which culminated in Troeltsch. This, in turn, was the tradition against which Karl Barth reacted.<sup>15</sup>

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15. Cf John Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, SCM, London, 1963, for the influence of Schleiermacher on contemporary theology.

Liberal theology began, therefore, with Schleiermacher and its first phase ended with Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), a German historian and philosopher of religion, who applied the methods of W Dilthey's philosophy of history to the Christian faith. Troeltsch laid down three principles to guide us in our study of history:

1. The Principle of Criticism, which states that every tradition and received opinion must be sifted by criticism. This is work which is never finished, since fresh facts are always coming to light. Thus, an important principle is that the findings of historians can only lay claim to PROBABILITY. They are always open to correction and revision. As far as Christianity is concerned, this principle sums up all the results of all the historical research upon the Bible that went on in the century before Troeltsch was born.

2. The Principle of Analogy, which states that events of the past are analogous to those of the present. Thus, a report of past events which are analogous with those in the present must be deemed to have more inherent probability than a report of events for which there is no analogy in our present experience. For example, we have no present experience of miracles and wonders like those reported in the Bible. We must therefore assume that such events are highly improbable.

3. The Principle of Correlation, which says that every historical event is correlated with others in the same series. There is an integral continuity in history. The point of this principle is that while there may be distinctive events, all events are of the same order, and all are explicable in terms of which is immanent in history itself. Thus, there can be no divine interventions or

interruptions in history. And since all events are of the same order, it cannot be claimed that any event is final, absolute, unique, or anything of that nature.<sup>16</sup>

Troeltsch's account of religions, then, is that they are vehicles through which the human being's feelings for God take their concrete form within history. All religions take their origins from the religious 'a priori' built into human nature. In theological terms, therefore, Troeltsch offers us a view of religion which says that each tradition is the concrete, varied and independent manifestation of the universal revelation at work in all mankind. All religions share something in common: each is a concrete manifestation of the universal revelation. Thus, Troeltsch gives us help in understanding something of the plurality and relativity of all religions. But, the help that he gives us is not always and everywhere as clear as it might be. His writings show that he changed his mind on more than one matter, and that he had to admit towards the end of his life that he had been wrong! Nevertheless, he has given us two criteria to consider in trying to affirm the relativity of religions and The Absoluteness of Christianity.

The first criterion he gives us is success. To judge the value of a religion or the quality of its expression of the Absolute, we must look at how well it has succeeded in holding the human heart. Has it withstood the buffeting of history and cultural change? Troeltsch thought that Christianity was the most successful religion in these terms, because, as T S Eliot declared, "it is always adapting itself

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16. Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, pp 140 ff

into something which can be believed". The second criterion by which religions may be judged is what Troeltsch called spirituality. He divided religions into groups. One group, the 'primitive religions', he arbitrarily dismissed as "irrelevant to the problem of highest religious values". The second group consisted of the "religions of ethical and spiritual greatness", which he then broke down further into those that look upon the Ultimate as impersonal and those that view God as a person. He then concluded by asserting:

"The personalistic redemption religion of Christianity is the highest and most significantly developed world of religious life that we know."<sup>17</sup>

In this way, Troeltsch believed that he had made a case for Christianity as the highest point of the religious life of this world. He summed it up as follows:

"Thus Christianity must be understood not only as the culmination point but also the convergence point of all the developmental tendencies that can be discerned in religion. It may therefore be designated, in contrast to other religions, as the focal synthesis of all religious tendencies and the disclosure of what is in principle a new way of life."<sup>18</sup>

He also added a number of qualifiers. The Christianity to which he gave such a position was the reformed Christianity that he was himself proposing, stripped of superstition and uncritical thinking.

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17. Paul Knitter, No Other Name, pp 26-30

18. Ibid p 28

Also, he made his case only for the present state of affairs, there was no guarantee that he could see that Christianity would always remain at the apex of religious life and achievement. Nevertheless, Troeltsch made a clear and bold case for the superiority of Christianity within a universe of faiths, each having its own position and meaning.

The final voice to be selected for consideration in this survey of the Christian tradition and the theme of other faiths is that of Karl Barth (1886-1968). Barth is usually understood in terms of the radical discontinuity between this theology and all that went before, but especially the liberal theology of Schleiermacher and Troeltsch. His Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans fell "like a bombshell in the playground of the theologians" and initiated a whole movement in theology which came to be known as Neo-Orthodoxy. Yet, it is as well to remind ourselves that Barth was just as concerned to speak to the needs of his day as Schleiermacher and Troeltsch had been to speak to their times. What is totally different in Barth is the way in which he reads the human condition.

Barth's perception of the nature of humanity was based on three insights:

1. First of all, Barth diagnosed the state of Europe in the early years of the twentieth century as being one of confusion. In particular, he believed that Christians were being inundated with a mass of new ideas and were awash in a sea of pluralism. What was needed, therefore, was a return to the core and clarity of the Gospel. In his pastor's pulpit in the little Swiss town of Safenwil, Barth realised that his liberal sermons did not speak to the deepest

spiritual needs of his people.

2. Secondly, Barth saw that part of this problem was the reality of evil. Liberal theology's evolutionary optimism did not take into account the fact of human limitations, selfishness and ideological illusion. Barth came to these conclusions from looking upon the slaughter of the First World War:

"The heady wine of nineteenth century optimism,  
evolutionary progress and universal brotherhood  
went perceptibly flat on the fields of Flanders and  
Verdun."<sup>19</sup>

3. Thirdly, facing the confusion all round him, and reflecting upon the reality of evil, Barth came to the conclusion that man cannot resolve these problems for himself. Here, Barth agreed with Troeltsch, all human knowledge is limited and conditioned by history. But, his solution to this conundrum is radically different. If man cannot know God, then "let God be God". This means admitting our own inadequacies, accepting God's self-revelation, and letting God save us. And this is precisely what God has already done, in Jesus of Nazareth, and only in Jesus of Nazareth.

Barth's view of the world religions is contained in a famous paragraph 17 of volume 1/2 of his Church Dogmatics. In very brief summary, Barth says that only God's word can tell Christians what the religions really are. And what this word tells us rests on two foundation parts of the New Testament message. The first part is that only God can make God known. The idea of a 'general revelation' is therefore totally false. The second is that as only God can

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19. Paul Knitter, No Other Name, p 18



reveal God so only God can save mankind. We are saved "only by grace". This means that any time that anyone tries to find salvation he automatically falls into a state of rebellion.

What these two basic truths mean for the religions of the world is quite clear, and Barth urges that Christians must face up to it with rigorous honesty. There is a place for recognising that there is beauty and truth and goodness in all the religions, but that has nothing to do with them as means to salvation. All these human values stand under judgment of the divine revelation on all religion. So, religion must be seen as the human attempt to do what only God can do, in Christ. Thus, we come to Barth's famous verdict on all forms of religion; including Christianity:

"Religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed we must say that it is the one great concern of godless man .... From the standpoint of revelation, religion is seen to be an attempt to anticipate what God in His revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of a divine work by a human manufacture."<sup>20</sup>

Having thus announced God's judgment on the religions as a form of unbelief, Barth then draws his practical conclusions as far as the relationship of the Gospel and other traditions goes. Theologians and missionaries must not seek a relationship between the Christian revelation and other faiths. Nor must they look for questions in other religions to which revelation supplies the answers. Nor again

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20. Paul Knitter, No Other Name, p 84

must they seek points of contact. The relationship between the Christian message and other religions is always an either/or one, for we have here an exclusive contradiction.

One further point needs to be made. According to Barth all religions are "unbelief". This means that the Christian religion is under judgment. In one sense, therefore, there is no difference between Christianity and all the other faiths. How, then, can Barth speak of Christianity as the "true" faith? The answer is simple, and profound! We can speak of "true religion" in the same way that we can speak of "justified sinners". Just as human beings, despite and with all their natural sinfulness, can be accepted by God, so a religion with all its corruption can be exalted by God. And if we ask how this can be, then Barth replies:

"Not of its own nature and being but only in virtue of a reckoning and adopting and separating which are foreign to its nature and being, which are quite inconceivable from its own standpoint, which comes to it quite apart from any qualifications or merit."<sup>21</sup>

As with everything else in Barth, God does everything. The religion offers nothing, it is saved "sola gratia" - by grace alone.

This has been a brief and very selective survey of the Christian tradition. The theologians who have been discussed are only a few among many. Yet, they are representative and they are significant.

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21. Paul Knitter, No Other Name, p 85

From the survey it is clear that thinking about other faiths was only a submerged theme in Christian theology for over a thousand years. And, within that submerged theme, it is possible to find only a few pointers to a more positive assessment of other faiths. The theology of other faiths is only a minority concern. Part of the reason for this, as we observed when thinking about the biblical theology of other faiths, is that most of the Christian theologians of the past knew little, if anything, of the great religious traditions of the world. With the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century all that was to change and thinkers had to write with knowledge of other faiths. Thus, the theme that had been submerged for over a thousand years now emerged into the clear light of day as the Christians faith encountered and entered into dialogue with other faiths.

## CHAPTER 6 :

### ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE

We have seen how thinking about other faiths has been only a submerged theme within the Christian tradition and that the reason for this is that many Christians never met anyone of another faith. For over a thousand years, theologians were concerned mainly with what might be called 'domestic' issues, that is, issues of doctrine and dogma relating to the life of the Church. In the middle of the nineteenth century all that was to change.

In his historical survey of Christian missions, Stephen Neill entitles the period from 1858 to 1914 "The heyday of Colonialism". He tells us that in 1858 peace reigned, almost unbroken, for half a century; the whole world was open to western commerce and exploitation; the day of Europe had come. In particular, he claims that five events took place in the years 1858-1863 which were to set the tone for the missionary enterprise of the Protestant Churches over the whole period.

1. The first event was the acceptance by the British Government of responsibility for rule and administration in India. The spirit in which this responsibility was accepted is best seen in the proclamation made by Queen Victoria at the time:

"Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, We disclaim alike the right and desire to impose Our convictions on any of Our subjects. We declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure that none be in any wise favoured, none molested or disquieted by reason of their religious

faith or observance ..."<sup>1</sup>

Here was a proclamation which gave religious freedom and therefore confidence not only to Christians but also to Hindus, Moslems and Sikhs.

2. The second event was the conclusion of the war of the European powers with China in a series of treaties which granted religious tolerance to European and Chinese Christians in China. This opened up a vast mission field.

3. The third event was the Second Evangelical Awakening, which started in America and spread to Europe, notably Northern-Ireland, and carried with it an intense individual desire for participation in mission. This led then, in turn, to the foundation of many new Missionary Societies.

4. The fourth event was the entry into Japan, in 1858, of the first missionary of modern times. This called the whole Church to yet a further missionary task.

5. Finally, in 1857, David Livingstone had published his book called Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa. The enthusiasm generated by this publication was intense and the Christian world became convinced that the time had come to go to Africa with the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in a very short space of time, Christians were working in India, China, Japan, Africa and other places with renewed energy. From the point of view of our enquiry, what was more important was that these Christians were coming into daily contact with people of

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1. Quoted in S Neill, A History of Christian Missions, p 323

2. Cf Neill, A History of Christian Missions, pp 322-325

other faiths - Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists, Shintoists, Taoists and Africans of Tribal Religions. From this time onwards, therefore, Christians moved into a position of encounter and dialogue with people of other faiths in a new way. The submerged theme in Christian theology became a burning issue simply as a result of practical encounter with those of other faiths.

In fact, the beginnings of a more sympathetic attitude, especially to Islam, can be traced back even further. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the exact date is not known, an Oxford don by the name of Henry Stubbe published a book with the resounding title An Account of the rise and progress of Mohemetanism with the life of Mahomet and a vindication of him and his religion from the calumnies of Christians.<sup>3</sup> Stubbe was an oddity, in more than one sense, but his work shows that there was an undercurrent of more sympathetic interest. He leant heavily for his knowledge on the work of Edward Pococke (1604-1691) the leading Arabist in seventeenth century England, and came to the following conclusion:

"That when we say that the Religion of Mahomet was propagated by the Sword, we must understand it only as a Consequence of their Victories, and not that they forced Men by slaughters and Murders into their Opinions."<sup>4</sup>

Another harbinger of more sympathetic views is to be found in a two

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3. See P M Holt, A Seventeenth Century Defender of Islam, Henry Stubbe (1632-1676) and his book, Dr William's Trust, London 1972.

4. See Holt, A Seventeenth Century Defender of Islam, p 24

volume work entitled Mohametanism Unveiled published in 1829 by Charles Forster. Forster was Rector of Sisted and described his work as "an enquiry in which the arch-heresy, its diffusion and continuance, are examined on a new principle, tending to confirm the evidence ... of the Christian faith". His reasons for the work he gives as "an earnest solicitude for the honour of Christianity". His efforts then, rather like Luther's in sponsoring a translation of the Qur'an, seem to be to expose what is wrong with Islam, rather than to commend it. But, the "arch-heresy" is given a sympathetic review, including an eight point analysis:

1. The obscurity of its origin.
2. The extent to which it changed the character of Arab society.
3. The abruptness of its rise.
4. The rapidity and extent of its propagation beyond the Arabian peninsular, which vindicates its truth in Moslem eyes.
5. The permanence of Islam. This is alleged to be secured by force, but Forster argued that it was "because the creed possesses an inherent spiritual influence".
6. The complete domination it has achieved over the minds of people of different cultures across North Africa and Spain.
7. Its power to change the creeds and characters of subject nations.
8. The purity of its expression, which is devoid of all ceremonial.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the submerged theme in Christian theology, therefore, we do well to remember that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, for Western Europe, a period of intense interest in the Arabic language and the religion, history and institutions of the Muslim

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5. I owe this reference to Dr Terry Thomas of the Open University in Wales, from some unpublished research.

peoples. Commercial links with the Ottoman Empire offered facilities for travel, while diplomatic links held out the possibility of residence in Muslim territory.

These first attempts to understand another religion were followed by the publication in 1845 of The Religions of the World and their Relations to Christianity by F D Maurice. Maurice was the son of a Unitarian minister who espoused a tolerant liberalism. He espoused the reality and unity of God but taught mainly about morals and politics. None of his family found this form of religion to be in any way satisfying and, one by one, they converted to Trinitarian Christianity. For Frederick the crisis came in 1831 and a year later he became convinced of a faith in Christ as the centre of the universe, after a long and agonising debate with himself and others. From now on this was to be the assured centre of his life, so assured that he could afford to be tolerant of many other forms of faith.

Maurice's greatest scholarly work was a history of "Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy" (1861), designed to show how a Christian might learn from the intellectual life of mankind. In it he went far towards saying that each nation's history was its own Old Testament, which suggests the possibility that each religion might be a preparation for Christ. In his lectures on The Religions of the World he also states clearly that both Christ was the Revelation of God and that Moslems or Buddhists were seeking God in sincerity and with some success. Both of these ideas were only possible for Maurice because of his doctrine of the Church. He believed that men enter the Church through the family. If they were faithful to the



duties of family life they would also be faithful to the duties of national citizenship, and if they understood themselves properly as members of families and nations they would enter into their heritage as members of the Church, the universal family.<sup>6</sup>

As Kenneth Cragg has reminded us, therefore:

"Frederick Denison Maurice in the mid-nineteenth century was lecturing to good effect on the religions of the world. Dialogue is no late idea."<sup>7</sup>

Maurice is important in his own right, but of even greater importance, from the point of view of the theology of religions, is his influence on others. In particular, through the work of a liberal missionary T E Slater, Maurice's work became known to J N Farquhar (1861-1929). His best-known work is The Crown of Hinduism (1913) which shows one way in which Maurice's idea that each nation's religion is its Old Testament might be developed. The framework of Farquhar's theology was provided largely by an evolutionary scheme interpreted in Christian terms. In his view, Christianity in its simplest form, as seen in the teaching of Jesus, was the evolutionary crown of the Hindu traditions. He described his method as:

".... setting forth Christianity as the fulfilment of all that is aimed at in Hinduism, as the satisfaction of the spiritual yearnings of the people, as the crown and climax of the crudest forms of her worship as well as those lofty

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6. See David L Edwards, Leaders of the Church of England, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1978, pp164-170

7. Kenneth Cragg, The Christian and Other Religion, Mowbray, London p 8

spiritual movements which have often appeared in Hinduism but have always ended in weakness .... The theory (of fulfilment) thus satisfied the science of religion to the uttermost, while conserving the supremacy of Christ."<sup>8</sup>

Alan Race tells us that this represents a form of inclusivism that was gaining recognition at the beginning of this century. His work demonstrated a great wealth of learning and depth of knowledge. He believed that his 'fulfilment theory' was not an imposition of Christian categories but truly reflected what was the case after detailed study of Hindu religious life - the Hindu scriptures, family system, asceticism, caste, worship and so on.<sup>9</sup>

The 'fulfilment theory' might have pleased Farquhar, but it did not gain approval by everybody. In particular, it was criticised by A G Hogg, who had gone to India in 1903, as a lay educational missionary, and who remained active there until 1939. He was not present at the great gathering of missionaries at the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, but he played an important part in its discussions through his friendship with D S Cairns. He was also one of the outstanding personalities of the Tambaram Conference in 1938. In between these two conferences he acted as what E J Sharpe has described as "the theological conscience of the Protestant missionary force in India".<sup>10</sup>

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8. Eric Sharpe, Comparative Religion, A History, Duckworth, London, 1975, p 153

9. Cf Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, p 57

10. Eric Sharpe, Faith Meets Faith, SCM, London, 1977 p 37

What Hogg proposed in answer to the 'fulfilment theory' is not easily stated in a few words. He held the view that, broadly speaking, there is a common core of faith in Christianity and Hinduism, but there is much diversity in the important area of intellectualisation. He also attempted to establish what he called "the challenging relevancy" of Christianity over Hinduism. His deepest conviction was the evangelical principle that Christ, if faithfully lifted up, would draw all men unto himself.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, from the middle of the nineteenth century, for fifty years and more, there was a more open and sympathetic approach among some Christian thinkers to the question of other religions. This more positive and sympathetic attitude came to fruition in the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910. It can be read in the fourth volume of the Report of the Conference, edited by D S Cairns. It also led to a heated debate, which continued through two subsequent conferences, at Jerusalem in 1928, and at Tambaram in 1938. Carl F Hallencreutz has given a full account of this debate in his Kraemer Towards Tambaram (1966). The Jerusalem Conference of 1928 was more positive towards other religions, recognising in them elements which are fulfilled by the Gospel. In preparing for the Tambaram Conference of 1938, Hendrik Kraemer saw no such thing.

Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) was an educator, ecumenist and writer on missions. He was born and educated in the Netherlands, where he became a specialist in oriental languages and customs. As a result of his expertise, he was sent by the Dutch Bible Society to serve the -----

11. Sharpe, Faith Meets Faith, pp 37-43

Dutch Reformed Church in Indonesia from 1922 to 1937, as a linguistics and Bible translation consultant. His most famous work was written as a study guide for the Tambaram Conference of 1938 and is entitled The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World. In it Kraemer argues that there is a radical discontinuity between Christianity and all the other religions.<sup>12</sup>

According to Kraemer, the real question to be faced by the Conference was: Do the non-Christian faiths reflect anything of the presence and power of God in any sense, and does any kind of divine initiative lie behind the world's manifold religious activity? He sought to answer the question by the application to it of the dialectical method, as he understood it. The dialectical method in theology is associated primarily with Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. To begin with, Kraemer had associated himself with Barth's total repudiation of other faiths - "Religion is unbelief". But now, he aligned himself with Brunner, who had written about the dialectical method and other faiths in the following terms:

"From the standpoint of Jesus Christ, the non-Christian religions seem like stammering words from some half-forgotten saying: none of them without a breath of the Holy, and yet none of them is the Holy. None of them is without its impressive truth, and yet none of them is the truth; for their Truth is Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup>

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12. Hendrik Kraemer, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1937

13. Cf Race Christians and Religious Pluralism, p 17

Following this idea, then, Kraemer writes in a more positive way about the way in which God is present to those who are outside the revelation in Christ:

"God works in man and shines through nature. The religious and moral life of man is man's achievement, but also God's wrestling with him; it manifests a receptivity to God, but at the same time an inexcusable disobedience and blindness to God,"<sup>14</sup>

Thus, for Kraemer, following Brunner and in distinction from Barth, the dialectical approach to other faiths revolves around these two axes: First, there is a general and universal revelation of God to all mankind, through the moral law and through the created order. In dialectical language this is God's "Yes" to the world. But, secondly, there is the perversion and distortion of this general revelation through sin and blindness. The breath of the Holy does blow through the religions, but the new order in Christ reveals the distortions at their heart. This is God's "No" to the world and, incidentally, to empirical Christianity as compared with the ideal Christian Gospel.

Kraemer also followed Brunner rather than Barth in another aspect, and that was in his detailed knowledge of other faiths. Alan Race tells us that Barth felt able to dismiss Hinduism, even though he had never met a Hindu, "A Priori"! Brunner advanced a large step from this, in that he had knowledge of Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism.

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14. Ibid p 18

Kraemer went even further, in that he had a detailed knowledge of the major non-Christian faiths, and especially Islam. Thus, Race tells us of Kraemer:

"His achievement was to combine in one all-embracing theory Christian theological principles, based on what he termed 'biblical realism', and a detailed knowledge of the essential religious dynamics of the major non-Christian faiths."<sup>15</sup>

Historically, Kraemer's work was important, but limited, for he only represents one wing of the debate in the inter-war years. On the other wing was W E Hocking, an American philosopher.

W E Hocking (1873-1966) grew up in the Middle West in a family of strong Methodist piety. He studied at Harvard and was strongly influenced by William James and Josiah Royce. Later, he went to Europe to complete his education and there was influenced by Husserl, a phenomenologist. Hocking confronted the problem of the relations between the religions when he was chairman of a commission of laymen whose task was to study the foreign mission work of six Protestant denomination in Asia in 1930. The report of this commission was published in 1932, edited by Hocking under the title Rethinking Missions. In the introductory section, on general principles, also written by Hocking, we find the themes which inform all his later work: the religions of the world should see each other as partners, not antagonists; this partnership between religions is possible because there is a core of religious truth which is "the inalienable religious intuition of the human soul". Thus, the relationship

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15. Cf Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, p 21

between the religions should be one of mutual help in the search for the completest religious truth.<sup>16</sup>

In his book Living Religions and a World Faith, published in 1940, Hocking gives clear expression to his hopes for a world community. He also wonders whether such a community can exist without one world religion:

"With it, the question is bound to arise whether a world religion is not a necessary accompaniment of world culture, and if so, what sort of religion it must be."<sup>17</sup>

He further expresses the hope that this can be, and that it can be by 'The Way of Reconception', based on the premise that all religions contain a core of truth expressed in different ways:

"In proportion as any religion grows in self-understanding through grasping its own essence, it grasps the essence of all religion, and gains in power to interpret its various forms."<sup>18</sup>

For Hocking, then, the essence of all religions is a future reality and the prefigurement of this future reality is found in the Christian faith:

"In its ideal character, Christianity is the 'anticipation of the essence' of all religion, and so potentially contains all that any religion

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16. Owen C Thomas (Ed), Attitudes Towards Other Religions, p 134

17. W E Hocking, Living Religions and a World Faith, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1940, p 21

18. Ibid p 148

has."<sup>19</sup>

Hocking's position can therefore be described as one in which a search for the essence of religion is combined with a type of fulfilment theory. He thus sowed the seed for all those writers who have since sought some common element in all the religions, usually in the form of a mystical approach to God. In our own time, one example of this can be found in the work of Dom Bede Griffiths, who has urged that a Christian theology of religions without a firsthand experience of a 'Return to the Centre' is destined to failure. The mystical experience is the place of meeting between the faiths because it is the mystical experience which proves that God has been revealing himself all the time in all the traditions.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, a series of books, written mainly in the 1960's takes a different line. The overall title of the series is "Christian Presence" and it is edited by Max Warren. It includes such writings as K Cragg, Sandals at the Mosque (1959), J V Taylor, The Primal Vision (1963), and W Stewart, India's Religious Frontiers (1964). All of these works are of a more explicitly theological nature than the work of Griffiths and exhibit an approach to other religions which is informed and sympathetic, but cautious. Another scholar of the same type is Bishop Leslie Newbigin, who in his books Honest Religion for Secular Man (1966) and The Finality of Christ (1969) shows sympathy towards the other religions but insists on the ultimate uniqueness of the Christian revelation.

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19. Ibid p 249

20. See, for example, Bede Griffiths, Return to the Centre, Fount, London, 1978 and The Marriage of East and West, Fount, London, 1983



Thus, the colonial experience and the emphasis on missionary endeavour brought the theme of confrontation and dialogue with the other religions into the forefront of Protestant theological debate. Even though their answers to the problem were very different, men like Farquhar, Hogg, Kraemer, Griffiths, Cragg, Taylor, Stewart and Newbigin were driven to think hard and long about the other religions because, in their missionary experience, they had met those religions face to face and had found that curt dismissal of them was not enough.

## CHAPTER 7 :

### ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY 1966-1978

If the colonial and missionary experience of the Protestant Churches opened up the whole world of religion to them, then the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960's had a similar effect on Roman Catholics. Called by Pope John XXIII, the Council considered issues of world-wide importance, and among them was the question of the other religions of the world. Eventually, the Council issued a decree on the non-Christian religions which was far more positive in its assessments than anything that had gone before. Walbert Bülhmann reminds us of what had gone before by quoting from Papal encyclicals and drawing attention to the fact that even as late as 1951, with his encyclical Evangelii praecones, Pius XII was still using the expression "pagans"!<sup>1</sup>

The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions was adopted on 28 October 1965 and unleashed a surge of interest in this neglected theological problem. Among the books to emerge was H R Schlette, Towards a Theology of Religions (1965), which tries to emphasise the need for a theological approach from a position of orthodoxy. J Neuner also edited a volume of essays under the title Christian Revelation and World Religions (1967) which took the argument further. It contained work by five writers: J Neuner, Hans Kung, Piet Franssen, Joseph Masson and Raymond Panikkar, on what is called "the new approach" to the religions of the world. To the non-Catholic observer this approach sometimes seems to be not much

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1. Walbert Bülhmann, All Have the Same God, St Paul Publications, Slough, 1979, p 27

more than a church-centred fulfilment theory, very similar to the Protestant idea of the Jerusalem Conference in 1928 and later. More importantly, however, this collection has in it the emerging view that the non-Christian, in so far as he lives by the best insights available to him, will be saved within his own faith. This view has been most widely stated in The Wider Ecumenism, Anonymous Christianity and the Church, published in 1968 by Eugene Hillman. But the view was first put forward by Karl Rahner, and is to be found throughout his published writings.

It is well to be clear in our minds about what Rahner intends by his theory of "Anonymous Christianity". First of all, it is not intended as a tool of dialogue but is intended for discussion within the bounds of Christian theology. Secondly, it is quite specifically intended to engender more 'optimistic' Christian attitudes towards other believers. The basis of this theory is set out in an address entitled Christianity and Non-Christian Religions, given in 1964.

In this address, Rahner sets out four theses as an outline towards a Christian theology of religion:

1. The first thesis states the position from which Rahner believes that all Christian thinking about other religions must begin:

".... Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognise any other religion beside itself of equal right."<sup>2</sup>

At first sight this thesis seems to exclude the possibility of saying

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2. Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations Vol V, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1966 p 118

anything positive about any faith other than Christianity. However, it is clear that Rahner does not intend it to be understood as a statement that limits salvation only to those who have responded to the revelation in Christ. What it affirms is that salvation, wherever it is found, is always of Christ, for Christ alone is Saviour.

2. This is made clear by Rahner's second thesis:

"Until the moment when the Gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion .... does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, .... it also contains supernatural elements arising out of the grace which it is given .... on account of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Here Rahner goes beyond the traditional Protestant claim that men and women of other faiths can have 'natural' knowledge of God within their own tradition. Here non-Christian religions are bearers of grace, which Rahner believes to operate in a person's life in his awareness of himself as a being of unlimited potential. It is also operative prior to any conscious acceptance of the Gospel although there is nothing new in this, since it is taught in one form by Calvin, in his doctrine of Predestination, and by Wesley in another form, in his doctrine of Prevenient Grace. The important point, however, is that Rahner stresses grace and claims that whenever expression is given to the experience of relationship between God and man, in sacred rites and scriptures, for example, the grace of God can be said to be working anonymously within the religion itself for

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3. Ibid p 133

salvation. Non-Christian religions can therefore be said to be vehicles of grace and salvation. The difference, then, between a Christian and a non-Christian is that the Christian is able to name the reality which is anonymously present in other faiths. This is reminiscent of the doctrine contained in Paul's speech on the Areopagus, recorded in Acts 17:

"What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."<sup>4</sup>

The same idea has also been expressed by Raymond Panikkar in the following way:

"The good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the 'Mysterion' that comes to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally."<sup>5</sup>

3. Rahner states it as his third thesis:

".... Christianity does not simply confront the members of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian."<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of this affirmation, it becomes clear that the missionary task of the Church needs to be re-evaluated. It consists in witnessing before the world to the hidden and unperceived Christ, who is at work in the rituals and institutions of all religions.

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4. See Acts 17,23

5. Raymond Panikkar, The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, Darton Longman & Todd, London, 1964, p 54

6. Rahner, Theological Investigations Vol V, p 131

4. Thus, the fourth and final thesis:

"(The Church is) the historically tangible vanguard  
and the historically and socially constituted  
explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is  
present as a hidden reality even outside the  
visible Church."<sup>7</sup>

Rahner's thesis is born of dogmatic theology. As Paul Knitter reminds us, he begins with the belief that God's desire is to save all mankind and then applies simple logic: if God really does intend to save all mankind then this means that grace, without which salvation is impossible, must be offered to all mankind. But, Catholic thinking understands the human being as a social animal. For grace to be universally available, therefore, it must be available in the concrete social institutions of the historical religions. Thus, non-Christians can be saved within their own tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Knitter also tells us that Rahner's position has now become a common one among Catholic theologians. He instances Walter Bülmann in his God's Chosen People (1983) and Arnulf Camps in his Partners in Dialogue: Christianity and Other World Religions (1983) as restating Rahner's basic position as they seek to develop a more open theology of religions. The dogmatic theologian Bernard Lonergan in his Method in Theology (1972) recognises a universalist and saving faith behind all the beliefs of the great religions. H R Schlette in his Towards

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7. Ibid p 133

8. Paul Knitter, No Other Name?, SCM, London, 1985, pp 125-127

a Theology of Religions (1965), already referred to at the beginning of this chapter, firmly states that it is God's will that the religions should be ways of salvation - independent of the special way of salvation of Israel and the Church. The religions of the world are the 'ordinary ways' of salvation, Christianity is the 'extra-ordinary' way. Finally, Richard McBrien, in his comprehensive study Catholicism (1981) reviews the different Roman Catholic approaches to the religions and finds that they all agree in recognising the validity of other religions as possible instruments of salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Amid all this general enthusiasm for the idea of the Anonymous Christian, Hans Küng remains unmoved by it. In his monumental work On Being a Christian he writes:

"This is a pseudo-solution which offers slight consolation. Is it possible to cure a society suffering from a decline in membership by declaring that even non-members are 'hidden' members?"<sup>10</sup>

Küng's criticism seems less than fair to Rahner, whose purpose does not appear to be to fill empty pews. Rather, his views seem to stem from trying to hold in tension two binding convictions - the universal will of God to save all people and the unique role of Christ as Saviour. Nevertheless, Küng's criticism of Rahner can be taken as forming the basis of his own position, in which he urges that the theory of Anonymous Christianity be dropped, on the grounds that it vaporises the Church into a universal presence. A Church

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9. Ibid p 127

10. Hans Küng, On Being a Christian, Fount, London, 1978, p 98 ff

which is everywhere, Küng insists, is a Church which is really nowhere. So, Küng argues for a theocentrism to take the place of the ecclesiocentrism in the Christian understanding of salvation.

Küng's position hinges upon his insistence that to be a Christian means to recognise and proclaim Christ as 'normative', not only for Christians but for all people. Jesus of Nazareth, he tells us, is "ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man's relationship with God, with his fellow man, with society." Jesus cannot be listed among the great men of the world, as if he were only one among many. He is uniquely different. Without the revelation of God's grace in Jesus the religions cannot really understand and appropriate the salvation which is at work in them. For Küng, then, Christianity is the 'critical catalyst' for all other faiths.<sup>11</sup>

Küng begins by criticising Rahner, but seems to end up with much the same degree of ambiguity in his own work. On the one hand, he extols the religions of the world as "the ordinary way of salvation" and points to areas where Christianity has much to learn from them. On the other hand, he asserts that they must be 'critically catalysed' by the normative Christian revelation:

"That God may not remain for them the unknown God,  
there is needed the Christian proclamation and  
mission announcing Jesus."<sup>12</sup>

Hence, his efforts to move from ecclesiocentrism to theocentrism actually involve him, in the end, in a move to Christocentrism. And

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11. Hans Küng, On Being a Christian, p 113

12. Ibid p 447



Knitter tells us that:

"This assessment applies to most of the Catholic theologians who are trying to work out a more coherent theology of religions."<sup>13</sup>

Mention of Knitter leads us to consider his own work in some detail. His book No Other Name? was published in the United Kingdom in 1985. Much of this work is taken up with "A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards the World Religions" (which is the sub-title of the book). These attitudes he divides into two - Popular Attitudes and Christian Attitudes. The Popular Attitudes are given as three in number, with a representative thinker for each category. Thus, Troeltsch is said to represent 'popular' relativism, Toynbee to represent 'popular' ideas about common essence and Jung to represent 'popular' ideas of a common psychic origin for all the religions.<sup>14</sup>

Already, then, we meet a problem in that it is difficult to see how far any of these attitudes can be described as 'popular'. Thinkers such as Troeltsch, Toynbee and Jung can hardly be included in a normal reading matter of the common man. What Knitter seems to be suggesting, perhaps, is that they, among the thinkers, give some sort of intellectual support to the 'popular' idea that the religions are "all about the same thing really", but whether this 'popular' idea can be said to be based on the work of Troeltsch, Toynbee and Jung is another matter. What this section of the book does in a positive way is to point to the fact that there is a common feeling that the

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13. Knitter, No Other Name?, p 134

14. Knitter, No Other Name?, pp 23-72

religions are all about the same thing at bottom. In contrast, when we turn to the work of Christian theologians, we find that this view is not 'common' to all.

In this section on Christian Attitudes, then, Knitter suggests four models. The first is described as The Conservative Evangelical Model and is based mainly on a discussion of Karl Barth, even though Knitter admits that Barth is not typical of the Conservative Evangelical scene!

"Certainly, Barth cannot be proposed as a classical Evangelical; in fact, many of the older vanguard of Evangelicalism may have rejected Barth and his 'neo-orthodox theology' as being too soft on liberalism."<sup>15</sup>

He goes on to claim, however, that Barth (and Brunner and Bonhoeffer) are now being re-instated as models of good theology on critical issues. It is perhaps as well to remind us ourselves here that Knitter is an American Roman Catholic and that what he says about the Protestant theological scene does not necessarily hold good for mainland Europe or the United Kingdom. Certainly, in British Protestant theology, there is not much sign of a Barthian revival and Brunner is in no way influential, although there is some reason to agree that the influence of Bonhoeffer endures, if only because there is a general interest in the Sixties, when Bonhoeffer's influence was at its height. All that being said, however, Knitter asserts that the Conservative Evangelical Model of a theology of other faiths is that of Christianity as "One, True Religion".

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15. Op Cit p 80

The second Christian Attitude outlined by Knitter is The Mainline Protestant Model, which he claims is built on Brunner and Althaus and has issued in the Mission Theologians, such as Neill, Newbigin, Thomas and Devanandan. The characteristic feature of this model is said to be 'Salvation Only in Christ'.

The third Christian Attitude examined by Knitter is The Catholic Model. This he traces from Vatican II, which he claims as the great watershed in Catholic thinking about other faiths. He then examines the work of Karl Rahner, whom he says is "the chief engineer of the Catholic work in the field". This leads him of necessity, to discuss 'Anonymous Christianity' and some developments from it in the work of Hans Küng.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, he claims that the Catholic Model is a 'Mainline Christian Model', which has influenced Anglican views, Eastern Orthodoxy, Third World Protestant theologians, Process Theology and the World Council of Churches! This seems a very large claim indeed, unless he means by it that all modern theology looks back to and is influenced by the first fifteen hundred years of the Christian tradition, which was 'Catholic'.

He also claims that there is a growing consensus among all Christian theologians on this topic:

"In fact, the approach to other religions we have been studying in this chapter can be well termed 'the mainline Christian model' that has been evolving since the 1960's across confessional

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16. See pp 130 and 132 above for some of this discussion.

lines".<sup>17</sup>

This claim that there is a growing consensus appears to be less than certain, especially since Knitter gives the title "Many Ways, One Norm" to the Catholic Model.

The Fourth Christian Attitude discussed by Knitter is what he calls the Theocentric Model. It is said to be the way of John Hick, Raymond Panikkar and Stanley Samartha, all of whom subscribe to the idea of 'The Relativity of All Revelations'. In this chapter Knitter also examines the Jewish Christian Dialogue and the Liberation and Political Theologies, concluding that this position, which he describes as "Many Ways to the Centre", requires an evolutionary shift in the Christian Consciousness (Hick's 'Copernican Revolution').

Following this survey of possible Christian Attitudes, Knitter then provides a third part to his study which he entitles "A More Authentic Dialogue". This, he believes, must be a theocratic model, God-centred rather than Christ-centred, which is very similar to the position of John Hick. Knitter seeks to allay fears that this may pose a threat to the foundation of the Church's faith. But, he does acknowledge that it involves "a re-interpretation of Christian experience and tradition". The questions this raises - How far can one go in the process of re-interpretation without breaching the essential continuity with the Christianity of the New Testament, the Fathers and the Tradition? - Knitter does not answer.

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17. Paul Knitter, No Other Name?, p 134

A final Roman Catholic writer to be considered is Gavin D'Costa, who is an Indian Roman Catholic, born in East Africa and now resident in the United Kingdom. His book is entitled Theology and Religious Pluralism and was published in 1986,<sup>18</sup> and D'Costa states that it tackles the central theological question as to whether salvation is possible outside of Christianity. He sees the issue focused sharply in two traditional and apparently contradictory Christian maxims. The first states that salvation is through Christ alone - "No one comes to the Father but by me". The second affirms that God loves all men and women in every age and place, and desires their salvation. As we have already seen, these are the questions with which Rahner began his exploration of the problem.<sup>19</sup>

D'Costa allows these questions to raise even more questions: Could a loving God consign the majority of humankind to perdition because these people did not know Jesus, often through no fault of their own? What do we make of the holiness we encounter in a Muslim neighbour or a Buddhist friend? If salvation can occur in these other religions is there any need for mission? Are all scriptures, practices and beliefs of equal value? If not, by what criteria can we decide between them? How should religious education be taught in a multi-faith society? Is it proper for a Christian to use Buddhist meditation, or to read passages from Hindu scriptures in worship? How can we appropriately maintain Christian witness in a flat which we share with three Sikh students? It will be seen, then, that D'Costa gets to the heart of the matter and demands theological

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18. Gavin D'Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism, Blackwell, Oxford, 1988

19. See pp 96 ff above

answers to practical questions.<sup>20</sup>

D'Costa singles out three approaches to the question of the relationship between different faiths. He terms them 'Pluralist', 'Exclusivist', and 'Inclusivist', and opts for the third approach himself. To keep the argument within bounds he selects three writers as representative of each of these approaches - John Hick, Hendrick Kraemer and Karl Rahner - though he refers to other writers in the course of his discussion. He sets out the three paradigm approaches like this: The pluralist maintains that "other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God, and Christianity's claim that it is the only path (exclusivism), or the fulfilment of other paths (inclusivism), should be rejected for good theological and phenomenological reasons".<sup>21</sup>

D'Costa's critique of those who differ from him is of interest. The strongest argument he brings against Hick is that his so-called 'Copernican Revolution' requires an all-loving God at the centre. But, this claim needs to be firmly grounded and Hick's 'Christian Theocentrism' is, in fact, inseparable from an acceptance of God as made known to us by Jesus. Moreover, he alleges that it is difficult to accommodate non-theistic faiths, such as Buddhism, within Hick's scheme. And, while Hick claims that all religions have similar soteriological structures, in turning from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, the danger that the notion of 'salvation' will

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20. Gavin D'Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism, p 21

21. Ibid p 24

be emptied of all substantial meaning is apparent.<sup>22</sup>

Turning from the 'Pluralist' to the 'Exclusivist' position, D'Costa takes Hendrick Kraemer as the representative figure. As with Knitter's choice of Barth as the normative figure of the Conservative Evangelical position, so with D'Costa's choice of Kraemer here. One wonders if no one has stated the Exclusivist position since Kraemer wrote The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World. In fact, D'Costa argues that no one has stated the case better, and so chooses him on those grounds.

Kraemer's whole approach to the question of other faiths is said to be governed by one fundamental tenet:

"God has revealed the Way, and the Life, and the Truth in Jesus Christ and wills this to be known through all the world."<sup>23</sup>

He accepted that Christian truth had to be presented to non-Christian peoples in ways that related to their own ways of life and thought. He was also ready to accept that God works for men outside the biblical revelation. But, he denied that man can arrive at God, or belief in God, by his own unaided powers:

"Under the searchlight of Christ all religious life, the lofty and degraded, appears to lie under the divine judgment, because it is mis-directed."<sup>24</sup>

D'Costa shows appreciation of Kraemer's unwillingness to accept an

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22. Ibid p 41

23. Ibid p 42

24. Ibid p 43

easy assimilation of religions, but he argues that Kraemer has not fully recognised the similarities between religions and the extent to which all religions possess a dynamic for change.

It is in Karl Rahner that D'Costa finds a satisfactory solution to the tension between the two foundation beliefs. Here, he claims, is a position which affirms the presence of the saving God in non-Christian religions, yet which still maintains that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God. He sets out Rahner's central theses which, he says, maintain that God is savingly present through the non-Christian religions, yet retain an absolute necessity for both mission and the Christian Church. He also discusses the term 'Anonymous Christian', which he claims should be abandoned, but not its underlying conviction that when a person is saved it is by God's grace that they are saved.

In his final chapter, entitled "Towards a Theology of Religion", D'Costa pursues the question of dialogue and mission. Dialogue takes place at two levels: between people and between official representatives of religious communities. Dr D'Costa stresses that dialogue must not be used as a means of securing conversion. Indeed, he claims that we must enter into dialogue knowing that we run the risk of losing our own faith, or arriving at a radically different understanding of it. All this equally applies to dialogue between official representatives of religions, with the added need to draw up agreed pastoral and theological guidelines.

(It should be noted that the World Council of Churches published such Guidelines on Dialogue in 1979, that the British Council of Churches



followed this up in 1980 with a discussion document with the title of Why Dialogue?, written by Kenneth Cracknell, and then its own Relations with People of Other Faiths. Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain.)

Dr D'Costa ends with this question: What remains of the truth of Christianity? He stresses that there are good grounds for maintaining that ultimately Christ is the definitive criterion of truth for the Christian. This does not mean, however, that there is no truth elsewhere. Rather, we are enabled to recognise God's grace outside the Christian revelation wherever 'charity, faith and hope' are practised by non-Christians. And, holding to a Trinitarian faith, we can accept that the Holy Spirit is not the exclusive property of the Christian Church.

In forty years the Roman Catholic position on other faiths has moved a long way. In 1951, as we have seen, Pope Pius XII was still describing adherents of other faiths as 'pagans'. The Second Vatican Council put an end to that sort of language and opened the door to more positive attitudes. The most influential thinker and writer in the Catholic tradition since then has been Karl Rahner, with his doctrine of 'The Anonymous Christian'. Rahner's idea has been a fruitful source of reflection, especially for teachers such as Knitter and D'Costa faced daily with the practical problems of encounter and dialogue. Of all the modern Roman Catholic thinkers on this topic, Hans Küng alone remains suspicious of Rahner's theory. But, Küng himself has not produced a satisfactory alternative, despite working at the problem in different ways.

## CHAPTER 8 :

### THE MODERN DEBATE IN LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM

Turning back from the Roman Catholic scene to that of Liberal Protestantism, we find that the discussion here has been dominated since 1970 by John Hick. In that year, Hick called a conference at Birmingham to discuss the relation between the religions of the world in view of their apparently conflicting truth-claims. Sixteen international scholars took part in the consultation and some of the contributions they made were later published in a volume entitled Truth and Dialogue, edited by Hick, and published in 1974.<sup>1</sup> Hick also wrote the final chapter to the book, in which he provided both a summary and a prospect for the future of the discussion.

In particular, Hick expressed the hope that while differences may continue to exist, the relationship between the religions might become like that obtaining between the various denominations of Christianity in this country. He also looked for a growing awareness on all sides of what the traditions have in common and a larger degree of practical co-operation. He ended on a hopeful note:

"We live in the midst of unfinished business; but we must trust that continuing dialogue will prove to be a dialogue into truth, and that in a fuller grasp of truth our present conflicting doctrines will ultimately be transcended."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Hick had himself already published a formula for

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1. John Hick, Truth and Dialogue, Sheldon Press, London 1974

2. Ibid p 26

transcending the conflicting doctrines of the religions. In 1973, in a book entitled, God and the Universe of Faiths, he wrote a chapter under the heading "The Copernican Revolution in Theology". In this chapter, Hick poses the question:

"Do we regard the Christian way as the only way, so that salvation is not to be found outside it; or do we regard the other great religions of mankind as other ways of life and salvation?"<sup>3</sup>

He then suggests that this question, and others like it, are unanswerable with the present 'Ptolemaic' theological system, in which all theological problems revolve around the central axis of our own tradition. So, he proposes what he calls 'a Copernican revolution in theology', saying:

"The needed Copernican Revolution in theology involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faiths, and the place of our own religion within it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is GOD who is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve round him".<sup>4</sup>

Such a 'Copernican Revolution' obviously raises sharp questions about the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. So, it is not surprising to find Hick's next piece of work on the theology of

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3. John Hick, God and the Universe of Faiths, Fount, London, 1973 p 131

4. Ibid p 131

religions is an essay in The Myth of God Incarnate.<sup>5</sup> Hick edited the volume and the essay in question is called "Jesus and the World's Religions". In it, Hick is chiefly troubled by the fact that incarnational language implies that God can be adequately known and responded to ONLY through Jesus. Thus, as it has been interpreted traditionally, the doctrine of the Incarnation excludes from the sphere of salvation the whole of religious life outside of the Christian faith. Hick therefore describes a literal interpretation of the doctrine of the Incarnation as 'theological fundamentalism', which must be outgrown in the same way that biblical fundamentalism has been outgrown. Jesus will then be only one point at which 'God-in-relation-to-man' has acted. So, he concludes, unless Christian theology achieves a 'Copernican Revolution' in its theological thinking, the influence of Jesus in the future may well be outside of the Church rather than in it, as a 'man of universal destiny', whose teaching and example become the common property of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, this view brought a sharp retort in The Truth of God Incarnate,<sup>7</sup> a volume of essay written in reply to The Myth of God Incarnate. For there, Stephen Neill charges Hick (and others) with 'the old Unitarianism'. He also alleges that the peaceful co-existence of faiths is impossible, since Islam, Buddhism and Marxism also claim to have the whole truth and could not abandon attempts to convert others without ceasing to be themselves. In addition, he asserts that conversion to Christianity is a fact to be reckoned

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5. John Hick (Ed), The Myth of God Incarnate, SCM, London 1977

6. The Myth of God Incarnate, p 29

7. Michael Green (Ed), The Truth of God Incarnate, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1978

with, and that when a convert finds salvation in Christ he rarely speaks of the old religion as a preparation for the Gospel, but rather as a world of darkness from which he has now escaped with great joy.<sup>8</sup>

Hick has also been criticised in a more general way by the conservative theologian Michael Green. He has identified five pressures which affect modern theologians. The first pressure he sees as deriving from science and technology; the second from the study of history; and third from philosophy; the fourth from the secular nature of modern society and the fifth from what he calls 'mysticism', which is "very noticeable in secular writings, but is no less prevalent among theologians". He goes on to complain that with pantheistic and mystical tendencies pressing upon them it is hardly surprising that "the language and thought of Hinduism and Buddhism are increasingly seen in the writings of theologians like Don Cupitt, H A Williams and John Hick".<sup>9</sup>

Hick appears to be unmoved by this sort of criticism and has restated his position in The Second Christianity. There, he has argued that there are two sorts of Christianity; in the one, the Bible is seen as uniquely inspired and authoritative; the Christian world-view is therefore identified with that of the late first century church; the Gospel is an offer of personal salvation and a call to 'us-against-them' religious patriotism. In the other, it is our common humanity and a vision of one world that lies at the centre; there is also a

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8. Ibid p 30

9. Michael Green, article in Church Times

deep concern for global problems, such as the threat of nuclear destruction and the squandering of natural resources. There is also a willingness to see the great religious traditions of the world - Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, African Religions - as representing different awarenesses of and different responses to a divine Reality:

"A divine Reality which transcends all our human thoughts and images, scriptures and cults."<sup>10</sup>

For further discussion of Hick and, in particular, of the problems of incarnational theology for Christian thinking about other faiths, we turn to the work of Alan Race published in 1983 under the title of Christians and Religious Pluralism.<sup>11</sup>

Race identifies three broad approaches taken by Christian theologians in the matter of other faiths. He terms these approaches Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism and he considers each one by reference to the work of particular writers.

Exclusivism is said to count the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions are to be judged. It is seen in the writings of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Hendrick Kraemer. Race is critical of this approach, mainly on the grounds that our present knowledge of religions and our awareness of the relativity of all knowledge make any claim to absoluteness arbitrary. He also claims that, in any case, the exclusivist interpretation of the New

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10. John Hick, The Second Christianity, SCM, London, 1983, p 68

11. Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, SCM, London, 1983

Testament is not the only possible interpretation.

Inclusivism is described as both the acceptance and rejection of other faiths. Their spiritual power is accepted, but their power to save apart from Christ is rejected. In the New Testament, we have the example of Peter's attitude to Cornelius and Paul's speeches at Lystra and Athens as pointers to this as a possible way. Race also finds evidence of this view in the Apologists in J N Farquhar and in Rahner. In fact, he claims that there are two forms of inclusivism. One is the 'Anonymous Christian' form of Rahner and the other is the 'inclusive Christian universalism' of Hans Küng, who claims for Christianity not exclusivism but uniqueness. Both forms of inclusivism are criticised by Race for prejudicing the issue of truth:

"In an age that values the historical and empirical, to say that one religion contains the fullest expression of religious truth and value, without any recourse to the empirical data of the other religions themselves, is tantamount to an unjustified theological imperialism."<sup>12</sup>

Pluralism, which Race favours himself, is said to be represented by Ernst Troeltsch, W E Hocking, Arnold Toynbee, Paul Tillich, John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Pluralism accepts that knowledge of God is partial in all faiths, including Christianity, and holds that all religions must acknowledge their need of each other if the full truth about God is to be available to all mankind. The weakness of

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12. Ibid p 68

pluralism, Race feels, is that it gives a sense of 'debilitating relativism' but, nevertheless, it is the only fully adequate option in the modern world with our awareness of other religions.

If pluralism is inevitable for a theology of religions in the modern world, as Race asserts, then the problem for the Christian theologian is how to deal with the differences between the religions without adopting an easy syncretism. Those who support dialogue believe that a prolonged period of discussion between religions on many levels will show that the difficulties are not insurmountable. Indeed, in his final chapter, Race argues that such dialogue is the only way to reach possible truth about God:

"Pluralism in the Christian theology of religions seeks to draw the faiths of the world's religious past into a mutual recognition of one another's truths and values, in order for truth itself to become the proper focus."<sup>13</sup>

The most important part of Race's work has to do with the doctrine of the Incarnation. He rightly seizes upon the fact that the crucial issue in the relation of Christianity to other faiths is this one doctrine. If Jesus is the unique Son of God, he must be the only full revelation of God, and his agent for the salvation of the world. Race therefore examines recent discussions of Christology and places them in relation to the three attitudes to other religions that he has identified. His conclusion is that to treat the language of incarnation as mythological does resolve the philosophical

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13. Ibid p 148



difficulties inherent in positing divine intervention in the world and in applying the concept of pre-existence to Jesus. With a mythological interpretation we are able to talk meaningfully of God's action in Jesus, accepted as fully divine but through whom "God has acted in such a way as to provide a path of reconciliation with God". Such an "action-christology" accords fully with inclusivism, Race believes. In particular,

"Jesus is 'decisive', not because he is the focus for all the light everywhere revealed in the world, but for the vision he has brought in one cultural setting."<sup>14</sup>

And, if anyone should object to this, on the grounds that it loses that universalism which lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel, then Race believes that the answer is to be found in Hick:

"We have to present Jesus and the Christian life in a way compatible with our new recognition of the validity of the other great world faiths .... The Christian gift to the world is Jesus, the largely 'unknown man of Nazareth', whose impact has, nevertheless, created such powerful images in men's minds that he is for millions the way, the truth and the life. Within the varying cultures and changing circumstances of history he can still create fresh images and can become men's lord and liberator in yet further ways."<sup>15</sup>

Race feels that this quotation suggests a way forward for two

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14. Ibid p 136

15. John Hick, "Jesus and the World's Religions", in The Myth of God Incarnate, p 182

reasons: first, it rescues Christians from embarrassment in an age of historical consciousness and, secondly, it releases Jesus to make his impact afresh in the dialogue, at the important level of religious experience. So, he quotes with approval, these words of Frances Young:

"What we make of Christ cannot be considered without reference to our total experience of God's world, a world in which everything is coloured by the specific peculiarities of individuals, cultures, historical circumstance and so on."<sup>16</sup>

The survey of the theology of religions undertaken in the last three chapters shows that the debate has revolved around a number of axes. The first one is found in Farquhar's 'fulfilment theory' which is as old as the Apologists, but which has also appeared in a new and rather different form in Rahner, Küng and D'Costa. The second one is 'exclusivism', which is most clearly stated in Barth, followed by Kraemer, and is present in Conservative theology today. And the third is 'pluralism' (or 'relativism') which began with Troeltsch and is seen most clearly in Hick, and Race and Knitter in different forms. All of which prompts two questions, asked by a reviewer in The Expository Times:

"First, is not the present state of dialogue between religions as yet too little advanced for overarching theories to carry much conviction?

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16. Frances Young, "The Finality of Christ", in Incarnation and Myth, Michael Goulder (Ed), SCM, London, 1979

Second, are those who write on religious pluralism so concerned not to offend that they bypass the less praiseworthy elements in the different religious traditions and practices and, to that extent, fail to present a complete picture of their subject matter?"<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the modern period reviewed in these chapters has seen a shift away from theories about other religions that were simply based on what Barth called 'A Priori' knowledge, and a shift towards a genuine encounter between people of different faiths. Not least, since 1970, the World Council of Churches has been actively involved not only with encounter, but with sponsoring a dialogue between people of different faiths. We turn now to a description and evaluation of that dialogue.

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17. The Expository Times Vol 100, no 2 p 5

## CHAPTER 9 :

### A DECADE OF DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

At the same time that John Hick and others were bringing the question of Encounter and Dialogue into the mainstream of theological debate in the United Kingdom, the World Council of Churches was also beginning to work at the problem in Geneva. In 1971, the Council set up a Sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies and appointed S J Samarth as its Director. Throughout the 1970's, Samarth edited a number of publications for the World Council, most of them reports on and reactions to various conferences held between people of different faiths. The various major works which reflect this Dialogue with the World are as follows:

Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths, papers representing a Consultation held at Ajaltoun, Lebanon in 1970.

Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement, the findings of the Ajaltoun Consultation, and Aide Memoire of the Zurich Consultation and the guidelines for dialogue accepted by the World Council of Churches Central Committee and other papers, published in 1971.

Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals, a discussion on the meaning of salvation according to a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim and a Marxist, published in 1974.

Towards World Community, resources and responsibilities for living together, papers presented to the multi-lateral dialogue, Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1974.

Faith in the Midst of Faiths, an account of a theological consultation attended by Christians from all over the world held at Chaing Mai, Thailand, in 1977.

All of these works were edited by Stanley Samartha, who also published a volume entitled Courage for Dialogue, in 1981. This is a collection of his own essays and papers contributed to the World Council of Churches' Dialogue and other groups. In a way, then, this last volume sums up a decade of dialogue with the world to be found in the other volumes. We will therefore take the essays in Courage for Dialogue as representing the concerns of the World Council in its Dialogue with the World of Other Faiths.<sup>1</sup>

Stanley Samartha describes his collection of essays as addressed "not just to Christians" and he makes the claim that "their context is wider, their concerns more inclusive". It will be useful, therefore, to begin by considering both the context and the concern of the essays.<sup>2</sup> The context, as we have seen, is pioneering work done at the World Council of Churches, during which the author went through the refiner's fire. He tells us, for example, that during the course of his ten years as Director, "doubts had to be removed, reluctances overcome, and motivations made clear, before dialogue could be accepted as one of the ecumenical concerns for the churches today".<sup>3</sup> The concern of the essays is also easily identified:

"A single theme holds the essays together: the concern for inter-religious understanding and co-operation in the quest for larger community in a world of tensions and conflict."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Stanley J Samartha, Courage for Dialogue, WCC, Geneva 1981

2. Ibid p viii

3. Ibid p vii

4. Ibid p ix

Thus, four essays deal with the subject of dialogue itself; four treat some of the theological issues raised by the topic; one considers religious resources for peace and the last two are specifically concerned with Hindu-Christian relationship. It will be seen, therefore, that the World Council of Churches' involvement in a Dialogue with People of Other Faiths springs from a concern for world-community, but that this practical concern leads into the theological issues. Here we are mainly concerned with these theological issues.

An obvious place to begin a consideration of these theological issues is with the essay "Significant Issues in the Continuing Debate". This was written in 1972, in response to the debate caused by the interim policy on dialogue accepted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at Addis Ababa in January 1971. This interim document had three main emphases. Firstly, it recognised and accepted dialogue with people of other faiths is one of the major concerns of the ecumenical movement. Secondly, it emphasised that Christians enter into dialogue from the point of view of their faith(s) in Christ. Thirdly, it adopted a set of recommendations as guidelines to the churches in a multi-religious world, including recommendations to "selective participation in world religious meetings".<sup>5</sup>

The responses to this interim statement were many and various and, from them all, Samartha was able to compile the following list of

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5. Courage for Dialogue, p 36

"Significant Issues in the Continuing Debate":

1. The approach to Dialogue and the question of Truth.
2. The theological basis of Dialogue and the question of the work of the Holy Spirit.
3. The place of mission and witness in a dialogue between different religions.
4. The possibilities of dialogue with people of other ideologies, such as Marxists and Secular Humanists.
5. The possible contribution of Dialogue to world community.
6. The place of worship and prayer in the context of dialogue between men of different faiths.<sup>6</sup>

The remaining essays in the collection revolve around most of these topics.

The first essay, for example, is concerned with the theological basis of dialogue. In it, Samartha asserts that there are at least three theological reasons why dialogue is, and ought to be, a continuing Christian concern. The first is this:

"God, in Jesus Christ, has himself entered into relationship with persons of all faiths and ages, offering the good news of salvation. The incarnation is God's dialogue with humanity."

And the second is:

"The offer of true community inherent in the Gospel through forgiveness, reconciliation and a new creation, and of which the Church is a sign and symbol, inevitably leads to dialogue."

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6. Courage for Dialogue, p 41

Then, thirdly:

"There is the promise of Jesus Christ; that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Since truth in the biblical understanding is not propositional but relational, and is not to be sought in the isolation of lonely meditation but in living, personal confrontation between God and man, and people, dialogue becomes one of the means of the quest for truth."<sup>7</sup>

So, for Samartha, the theological impetus for dialogue with people of other faiths arises out of the Christian doctrines of Incarnation and Reconciliation, interpreted in universalist terms. It also rests on the biblical understanding of truth as relational. Thus, he can assert, further

"The basis on which Christians enter into and continue dialogue with others is their faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has become man on behalf of all people, of all ages and of all cultures."<sup>8</sup>

We can therefore go so far as to say that the theological basis of dialogue for Samartha is christological. Indeed, at one point he actually says himself:

"It is christology, not 'comparative religion', that is the basis of our concern."<sup>9</sup>

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7. Ibid p 11

8. Courage for Dialogue, p 12

9. Ibid p 12



From the point of view of Christian theology this is all very interesting, since christological concern usually leads in the opposite direction - away from dialogue. Christocentric theologians are more usually noted for their rejection rather than their acceptance of other faiths. They are Exclusivists, rather than Inclusivists. It is of interest, therefore, to ask what Samartha sees as the purpose of this dialogue based on christological concern. And again, he is very clear:

"Our primary interest is not in 'inter-religious conferences', it is to be with Christ in his continuing work among people of all faiths and ideologies."<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to escape the conclusion, here, that Samartha is in the business of dialogue, not for its own sake, not for the establishment of world community, but for the salvation of the souls of the non-Christians. For example, he also quotes, with approval, from the International Review of Missions:

"It is because of our faith in God through Jesus Christ and because of our belief in the reality of Creation, the offer of Redemption, and the love of God shown in the Incarnation, that we seek a positive relationship with men of other faiths."<sup>11</sup>

It is the Incarnation, of course, which constitutes the main stumbling-block in the way of dialogue for many people, both of the

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10. Ibid p 12

11. International Review of Missions, no 236 (Oct 1970), p 384

Christian faith and other faiths. It is therefore interesting to compare and contrast this essay with that on "The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism", written in 1979. Here, Samartha discusses possible ways of understanding the relationship between the particularity of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and his universal love for all mankind. He sees two ways to open to us: one is to regard universality as just the extension of one particularity, which would mean the conquest of other 'lords' by Jesus Christ. The other possibility may be to regard God alone as Absolute and to consider all religions as relative. Samartha claims that such relativization of all religions would save their respective adherents from the obligation to defend their particular community of faith against all others. In this respect, then, Samartha seems to have moved away from his christocentric position to one much nearer that of John Hick.<sup>12</sup>

At the least, in his discussion of the Incarnation, Samartha has posed the problem and highlighted two ways of approaching it, by changing his own thinking from a 'cosmic christology', which was typical of the World Council of Churches in the 1950's and the 1960's, to a relativism of all revelations. As he says, this is one of the significant issues of the continuing debate, with discussion swirling around Christocentric and Theocentric standpoints, and leading inevitably, to the question of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.<sup>13</sup>

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12. See pp 127 ff above for a discussion of Hick

13. Courage for Dialogue p 41

So, this leads us to consider the essay on "The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures and Ideologies". In it, Samartha asserts that the Spirit of God cannot be regarded as the monopolistic possession of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He also urges that:

"A more sensitive recognition of the wider work of the Holy Spirit may also help us to broaden our understanding of God's saving activity."<sup>14</sup>

Samartha therefore acknowledges that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a problem, even within Christian theology. He further alleges that this is what accounts for a lot of the confusion within Christian theological circles about people of other faiths. So, he is not afraid to criticise Karl Barth in this respect, claiming that his use of the word 'religion' is very misleading. In particular, he points to the fact that misuse of the concept of 'religion' can de-personalise the discussion. 'Religions' are not personal, only persons are personal and capable of personal relationships:

"One of the most important lessons that Christians have learned, some of them reluctantly, through experience of actual dialogue, is that there can be no dialogue between one belief and another. Dialogue can only take place between people, living people, sharing the conflicts, ambiguities, tragedies and hopes of human life."<sup>15</sup>

In this view Samartha has a very powerful ally in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who has proposed a new way of looking at religious traditions,

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14. Ibid p 63

15. Courage for Dialogue, p 69

showing that the concept of 'religions' is a modern one, originating in the West and exported to the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> Again, in line with this way of thinking, Samartha urges that we welcome the dismantling of the notion of 'religions' and proposes that such a work can only come about through dialogue, which he sees as the work of the Holy Spirit:

"When a Christian, or a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Marxist meet, sharing the mystery of existence, longing for salvation and liberation, groping for meaning and struggling for strength, can one limit the work of the Holy Spirit only to the Christian partner?"<sup>17</sup>

In the same essay, Samartha also touches on the problem of biblical authority and dialogue. In addition to the points already noted above, where we discuss his contention that the salvation-history form of biblical theory is not the only form available to us, Samartha also makes here the important point that arguments from silence are dangerous.<sup>18</sup>

In the light of everything said so far, it will now be useful to examine what Samartha says about the problem of religious pluralism. In the essay "Religious Pluralism and the Quest for Human Community" he gives three reasons why syncretism is a misleading solution to the problem:

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16. W C Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, SPCK, London, 1978

17. Courage for Dialogue, p 69

18. See above pp 4-6

1. "Because a universal, synthetic religion cannot be fabricated".
2. "Because the creation of a world faith is not an alternative to religious conflict".
3. "Because any prophetic religion will defend itself against any attempt to use it for human purposes, however good these purposes may be".<sup>19</sup>

None of these arguments is exactly overwhelming. Whilst it may be true that no synthetic religion has so far been fabricated, it is by no means self-evident that such a faith cannot be constructed one day. Nor is it clear that the creation of one world faith is not an alternative to religious conflict. The record of individual faiths in their separateness in this respect is not inspiring. Also, it is not clear that the creation of a world faith can be dismissed out of hand, as a 'human purpose'. There is a sense in which this is what the argument is all about and that by being so dismissive Samartha is, in fact, begging the question. Despite this, he rejects the possibility of a world faith for world community, precisely on the grounds that it is doomed to 'failure':

"The attempt to create a world faith, either by advancing one particular faith, or by trying to mix up selected elements from particular faiths - a 'fruit salad' approach to religious pluralism - is doomed to failure."<sup>20</sup>

Despite this, Samartha does acknowledge that there are universal

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19. Courage for Dialogue, p 26

20. Courage for Dialogue, p 26

elements in a particular faith which may be useful to others in different cultural situations. He is also prepared to acknowledge that there are two sorts of syncretism. The first is an indiscriminate patching up of incompatible beliefs. The second is a system in which the elements in a cultural and religious situation are integrated naturally and consistently. And, he quotes with approval Raymond Panikkar's observation that, in the second sense, Christianity is already a syncretism:

"Christianity, sociologically speaking, is certainly one religion; it is ancient paganism, or to be more precise, the complex Hebrew-Hellenistic-Graeco-Latin-Celtic-Gothic modern religion converted to Christ with more or less success."<sup>21</sup>

What needs to be questioned here, of course, is whether Samartha or Panikkar is really talking about syncretism. Have they made clear the difference between syncretism and eclecticism? For, if syncretism is "the mingling of different philosophies or religions, resulting in a hybrid form of that religion or philosophy" then it is difficult to designate Christianity as syncretism. On the other hand, if eclecticism is "the choosing of particular elements from different philosophies and religions and combining them in a new, but not very original system", then most religions are eclectic and Christianity, if not as much as some, is certainly among them.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, then, it will be appropriate to consider what Samartha has

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21. Ibid p 26

22. See article on 'Syncretism' in Alan Richardson (Ed), A Dictionary of Christian Theology, SCM, London, 1969

to say about the problems of mission at a time of dialogue. His theocentric view of religion leads on to relativism. If the Christian faith is to be accepted as only one among many more or less true faiths what happens to the traditional Christian emphasis on mission?

Samartha argues that the word 'mission' ought to be abandoned altogether. He notes that the word 'witness' is more authentically biblical, and a much better one to use in the context of pluralism and dialogue. He also believes that he can see new ways of witness being developed: wherever people of different faiths are to be found struggling together for a new community of justice; wherever the pressures of history are such that every religious community is being challenged to find new ways of relating religion and society and politics; wherever in the realm of ultimate values there is a plurality of answers which shows that different religions have responded in different ways to the demands of the Ultimate. He also reminds us that all religions have an 'interim' and 'provisional' quality and that this only reinforces their relativity in relation to God, who alone is eternal.<sup>23</sup>

In the light of all this, is there any reason to hope that the religions will be creators of a new world community? Their role in this respect has sometimes been catastrophic in the past. In the essay "World Religions: Barriers to Community or Bearers of Peace?" Samartha tries to answer this question. He begins by admitting that they have a dismal record, citing their ability to disrupt existing groups, to divide people and intensify existing conflicts. Anyone

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23. Courage for Dialogue pp 102 & 103

can readily understand the force of this point by simply looking at the history of Northern Ireland or the Lebanon. Nevertheless, Samartha sees no need to be despondent. He believes that the religions can make contributions to a new world community in several positive ways:

1. By being on the side of the oppressed and the poor in their struggle for justice.
2. By exercising a humanising influence in the presence of cruelty, terror and violence.
3. By maintaining a constant vigilance against the misuse of power.
4. By holding on to their global dimension, which transcends ethnic, political and cultural differences.
5. By emphasising the element of hope which is a strong constituent of all religions - that ultimately God, or Truth, or Good, will prevail in spite of the persistence of destructive forces.<sup>24</sup>

What Samartha shows us, then, is that dialogue between people of different faiths demands courage. And this explains the reasoning behind the title of his book:

"The title was chosen because Christians and people of other faiths are afraid of dialogue. They fear being shaken in their comfortable, traditional beliefs. They fear being compelled to acknowledge truth in another camp."<sup>25</sup>

And with this we can agree. For we have seen in this review of Christian thinking about other faiths that only slowly has this theme

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24. Courage for Dialogue pp 126 & 127

25. Ibid p xi



come into prominence, and then only because the issue has been forced upon the Christian community in some way. It has only been as Christianity has had to face other faiths that it has been made to think about them and fit them into the scheme of things. The Apologists had to make sense of 'the good pagans' around them; the rise of Islam forced the Mediaeval Church into what little thinking it did on the subject; in particular, the missionary movement of the nineteenth century brought Christians face to face with those of other faiths, men and women of all the major living traditions. This seems to have been the imperative behind the dialogue. It begins with encounter; the encounter demands an answer of some sort; the way to find the answer is either by dogmatic 'a priori' pronouncements, or by dialogue. It also seems that the dialogue has only just begun and that we are a long way from finding a full and final answer to the question raised for Christian theology by the encounter with other faiths.

## CHAPTER 10:

### A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

We began this survey with a quotation from Faith in the City which asserted that the Christian churches had barely begun to face the theological problems raised by the presence of large numbers of adherents of other faiths in our cities, (see p i above). At the end of the survey, then, what can we say by way of reflection on these theological problems?

It is clear that we are no nearer to answers than anyone else. But, it may be that a review of the history of the problem has clarified the issues. In this final chapter, then, some attempt will be made to summarise the findings of the survey, which will be discussed under the following topics:

1. Scriptural Fundamentalism
2. The Idea of Revelation
3. Further Thoughts about the Nature of "Religion"
4. The Doctrines of Creation and Salvation
5. Christ and the Church

#### 1. Scriptural Fundamentalism

One of the first thoughts that emerges from this review of the history of Christian thinking about other faiths is that scriptural fundamentalism of any sort is a bar to progress.

This conclusion has been most clearly stated by Trevor Ling, in his work History of Religion, East and West. Writing about the early inter-action of European and Asian religious traditions he notes, "an excessively authoritarian control of religious institutions" which

leads to "a turning to mysticism, which was sometimes linked to defiantly literalist view of religious texts".

Ling also argues for a parallel development in Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, whereby doctrines which are affirmed in a religion are derived from one or more of the following sources:

- (i) The direct first-hand experience of individuals.
- (ii) Received traditions, consisting of the accumulated deposit of such experiences, which may be embodied in some agreed corpus of sacred writings .... or may be transmitted from person to person in oral tradition or in some institutional form.
- (iii) The exercise of reason upon the data of human experience.

Ling points out that in one type of religion one of these sources may dominate, whilst in another tradition a different source may be predominant. Most of the major religions have, at some time in their history, allowed space for all three, but in Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam the situation is rendered more complicated by the great veneration which has been afforded to the canonical scriptures in each case. There has always been a tendency in these traditions for the scriptural, received tradition to be given more weight than the other two. This has led to what Ling calls "a drastic re-appraisal of the scriptures in the modern period".

In turn, this has thrown up two main camps within each of the traditions: those who are ready to acknowledge that some of the elements within the scriptures are to be given more weight than others, and those who wish to affirm piously all that is contained in

the sacred writings. Ling concludes:

"Among literalists of the various religions there can be little common ground. On the other hand, among those who follow a more discriminating policy there is, as the adherents of these faiths encounter one another in the modern world, at least the possibility of dialogue and exploration."<sup>1</sup>

But, within Christianity, this problem is not only one for the literalists. The "drastic re-appraisal of the scriptures", to which Ling refers, has taken place within the Christian tradition over a period of more than a hundred years and at great cost. Theologians have learned only painfully how to re-state doctrines in line with scientific knowledge of the world and humankind. Yet, there is still a great deal of scriptural fundamentalism within the Christian tradition.

In his book Jesus: The Unanswered Questions, John Bowden describes his own theological training in the 1950's and refers to what he calls "the problem" he encountered and which he believes still exists:

"The problem lay, as it still lies, in the tension between the pre-critical understanding of the Bible so deeply embedded in the Christian tradition and the demands of truth in the modern academic

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1. Cf Trevor Ling, A History of Religion, East and West, Macmillan, London, 1968, pp 335 & 336

world."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, this problem is depicted as one that exists as between the academic world and the world of "the ordinary believer". But it is more complicated than such a simple analysis suggests.

The problem of scriptural fundamentalism for Christian theology is not only a problem of literalism. Nor is it only a problem of the gulf between the academic world and the world of the local church. It is also a problem of falling back, in tight theological corners, on this pre-critical approach. Thus, when confronted with the question of the legitimacy of other faiths as ways of salvation, many Christians are apt to respond by deluging the question with biblical texts and never consider that the biblical perspective may either be wrong-headed, or simply out of date in terms of its scientific understanding.

So, scriptural fundamentalism, which is more than textual literalism, is an unsolved theological problem in the search for a more discriminating approach to those of other faiths.

## 2. The Idea of Revelation

The seeds of this "more discriminating approach" are there in the Christian tradition, where theologians have made, to begin with, a distinction between Natural and Revealed Theology.

In what used to be called "the Mediaeval period", Natural Theology was held to formulate those truths about God which could be arrived

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2. John Bowden, Jesus: The Unanswered Questions, SCM, London, 1988, p 3

at by the power of unaided reason. Such truths were held to be accessible to all people. But it was also held throughout his period that such truths did not yield all that we need to know about God. They do not satisfy the real human need, which is for knowledge beyond that available to unaided reason. It was therefore held that Revealed Theology provides this saving knowledge of God which is expressed in such doctrines as those of Trinity, Incarnation and Redemption. These can only be learned from the Christian Bible, as received by faith and supported by reason, for example, from the arguments for miracle and prophecy. So, it was argued in this type of theology, that man is an incomplete being, who stands in need of divine grace, which supplements and perfects his natural knowledge. This is essentially the theology of a thousand years of Christianity from Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). At the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, some scholars, following Martin Luther (1483-1546), came to minimise the value of Natural Theology, because they were convinced of the paramount importance of revealed truth contained in the Bible. The watchword of the Reformation was "by faith alone", but it could easily become "by reason not at all", and this is what happened. Reason was overridden and revelation was exalted. Or, perhaps more accurately, revelation was made paramount. In the 20th century this position was vigorously re-affirmed by Karl Barth (1886-1968) and his followers, who were reacting violently against another development in post-Reformation theology.

This other development minimised the value of Revealed Theology and came to conclude that man could know all that he needed to know about the divine nature and purpose by reason alone. Beginning with Lord

Herbert of Cherbury (1538-1648), this line of thought came to an end with Deism, according to which revelation was no more than "re-publication of the religion of nature". The truly rational man therefore had no need of revelation at all.

Neither of these roads has got us very far. Today, it needs to be admitted that if sheer irrationalism is to be avoided then some decent philosophy of religion is required. But that which gives Christianity its distinctiveness is, of course, the revelation as contained in its scriptures, so the biblical categories must not be abandoned entirely.

The way forward may be in a distinction to be made, not between Natural and Revealed Theology, but between what might be called General Revelation and Special Revelation. Most contemporary Christian theologians hold that there is no such thing as purely unaided knowledge of God - or even of truth, beauty and goodness. All our knowledge of God and truth and value is inspired by God himself. According to this doctrine, no man is able to discover anything, or enunciate any truth in science, or philosophy, or religion, without the aid of God. Nor is any artist able to create beauty in art or music, without the inspiration of the Creator of all. Without the guiding of God, no reformer, whether he be Humanist, Atheist, Marxist or Christian, or any other religion, would be able to attack poverty and injustice.

John Macquarrie has described revelation as follows:

"A mood of meditation or preoccupation; the sudden

in-breaking of the holy presence, often symbolised in terms of the shining of the light; a mood of self-abasement (sometimes terror, sometimes consciousness of sin, sometimes even doubt of the reality of the experience) in the face of the holy; a more definite disclosure of the holy, perhaps a disclosure of a name or of a purpose or a truth of some kind (this element may be called the content of revelation); the sense of being called or commissioned by the holy to a definite task or way of life."<sup>3</sup>

There is, then, a General Revelation of God which is given to all men and women everywhere and makes them truly human. Hindu man, or Moslem man, or even Communist man, could not exist as man apart from this divine grace of General Revelation, which is expressed in biblical theology in the Doctrine of Creation, and most clearly by Paul in his "Epistle to the Romans", chapter 1, vv 20-23:

"Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images

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3. Principles of Christian Theology, p 7



resembling mortal man or birds or animals or  
reptiles."

This passage is usually interpreted with the stress on the blame to be attached to those (the Gentiles) who have become "futile in their thinking" and therefore resorted to some sort of idol worship. What is often missed is the assertion that God's "eternal power and deity" can be clearly perceived by all. According to Paul there is a General Revelation available to all.

Furthermore, in modern theology, this General Revelation is understood to be saving revelation for there is no such thing as non-saving knowledge of God. Yet, this general knowledge of God is not complete knowledge. Complete knowledge comes through Special Revelation, which is carried by the prophetic ministry of Israel and its culmination in Jesus of Nazareth. It is only by reason of this Special Revelation that the General Revelation can be fully understood, but it can be understood in part and even partial understanding yields saving knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup>

The General Revelation must therefore not be despised. The truths which are contained within the great religious traditions of the world, or the ethical insights of the contemporary Humanist, are genuine disclosures of God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us scriptural warrant for saying this in the opening words of his letter:

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our  
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4. Cf article on "Revelation" in A Richardson (Ed), A Dictionary of Christian Theology, SCM, London, 1969, p 146

fathers through the prophets ...."

God spoke, and still speaks by "the prophets" - all those who speak wisdom and truth and beauty and peace whatever their religious tradition.

But the same writer also goes on to assert the partial nature of this revelation:

".... but in these last days he has spoken to us by  
a Son, whom he has appointed the heir of all  
things, through whom also he created the world."

The idea of what might be called a two-tier doctrine of revelation has its difficulties, especially in the area of trying to decide what is revealed. But, there is less difficulty in using the idea to think about how much is revealed. All revelation is a revelation of God, but not all revelation reveals as much about God. It should also be noted and emphasised that the fuller revelation does not come through the Christian religion, but through "the Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things". While, therefore, there may be value in pursuing this distinction between General Revelation and Special Revelation, there is also value in reflecting upon the way in which we use the idea of "religion" in theology.

### 3. Further Thoughts on the Idea of "Religion"

Here we may be guided by the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and especially in his book The Meaning and End of Religion.

In this book, Smith deals specifically with what he calls "the

reification of religion" in the West. He claims that for most of western thinking religion is a "something" that a man or woman possesses, a reality that exists apart from human involvement. One result of this process of "reification" is that we can speak in the West about a number of "somethings" and call them "isms". It was therefore the western intellectual tradition which invented the notions of "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" and so on. Properly speaking, there is no such thing as "Hinduism" or "Buddhism" and researches into what "Hinduism really is" or "what constitutes the essence of Buddhism" are only doomed to failure, because they deal with false categories.<sup>5</sup>

Smith also argues that this process of "reification" has been applied to Christianity, with equally fallacious results. Christianity is a kaleidoscope of beliefs and practices. But scholars have again offered their views on what constitutes "the essence of Christianity" as though it were "something definite".

On the other hand, Smith claims that Christianity is a cumulative and constantly evolving tradition. For most of the church's history, therefore, "religion" did not mean what it now seems to mean, but referred to "piety", "devotion" and "godliness" and was understood to be a quality of being human:

"It is innate in every man, as it is the one characteristic which lifts man above the brutes.

It is an inner personal attitude."<sup>6</sup>

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5. W C Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, Macmillan, New York, 1962. All references to the 1978 edition, published in London by SPCK.

6. Ibid p 36

A basic conclusion of The Meaning and End of Religion, therefore, is that what we have tended to think of as "religion" is better thought of in different terms, and especially two factors. On the one side, Smith proposes that the term "religion" be abandoned, along with such terms as "Hinduism". In their place, he suggests the use of "the cumulative tradition of the Hindus, or Christians, or whoever". And for the personal religion of individuals he proposes the use of the single term "faith".<sup>7</sup>

Smith claims that the validity of his proposals can be tested in three particular areas:

1. They can be tested with regard to study of other men's religious life, where the tradition-faith analysis clearly fits well into scientific analysis of the religious phenomena.
2. They can be tested in the area of dialogue between the members of different traditions, where the analysis may offer a more fruitful way forward than the monologue preaching of the traditional missionary policy. It is in this area that Smith's ideas have obvious and important implications for our study.
3. They can be tested in the area of personal belief, where the problems raised by this method will be most acute for Christians and Moslems.

It is with regard to the Christian Theology of Other Faiths that Smith's discussion of religion is most helpful. He claims that the present Christian theology is inadequate and striving for a new

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7. Ibid p 194

intellectual and verbal expression. The Church is in need of a new theology that will empower Christians to be at once more modern and more devout; that will nourish a faith more closely attuned to both contemporary history and to the fullness of the majesty of God. He concludes that "the two most important movements of Christian thought in the twentieth century so far, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, have been oriented to one or other of these but not to both".<sup>8</sup>

Smith hopes that his study might contribute to the Christian task of doing justice intellectually to what we know about the world, including the world of religious faith, and what we know about God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. He also hopes that it might contribute to the intellectual aspect of our new task, which is, "together constructing a brotherhood on earth deserving the loyalty of all groups".<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. The Doctrines of Creation and Salvation

One area in which there needs to be some re-thinking has to do with the Doctrines of Creation and Salvation. Logically, the Doctrine of Creation comes before all others. And, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, it contains the seeds of a more positive attitude to those of other faiths.

The first of these seeds is to be found in the assertion that all men and women are the creation of the One, True God, (see p 22 above). The "scandal of particularity" may be understood in one sense as the

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8. Ibid p 137

9. Ibid p 138

move away from this doctrine to the Doctrine of Salvation, understood as a God's rescue of a chosen people from the dark forces of this world. But, there does not have to be this dichotomy between the Doctrine of Creation and the Doctrine of Salvation.

Thus, John Wesley summed up his own teaching, and the teaching of the subsequent Methodist Church, in these words:

All men need to be saved

All men may be saved

All men may know that they are saved

All men may be saved to the uttermost

This so-called "Methodist Quadrilateral" is usually interpreted as indicating the special Wesleyan emphases of Conviction, Conversion, Assurance and Christian Perfection. What is more interesting, however, from the point of view of our study, is the overwhelming emphasis on all. Wesley was one who proclaimed the Doctrine of Salvation, but he was not one who believed that this Salvation was restricted to the fortunate and chosen few. It was for all.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in his Notes on the New Testament, commenting on Acts 10,35, which reads, "In every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted by Him", he says:

"Is accepted by Him - through Christ though he knows him not. The assertion is express, and admits of no exception. He is in the favour of God, whether enjoying his written word and

ordinances or not.<sup>10</sup>

This leads us to look at these two doctrines from the point of view of modern scientific knowledge, which is another area in which there is a Christian pre-critical fundamentalism. Thus, in an article in The Guardian, Dr James Hemmings writes that while theologians discuss various issues of attitude and belief:

".... a time bomb is ticking, which may, at any moment, shatter beyond repair the bases of the western theologies they are discussing."

The time-bomb to which he refers is the evidence for life in other parts of the cosmos to which modern scientific research increasingly points. Life is potential throughout the cosmos, Dr Hemmings argues, and that means that the concept of a one and only inhabited planet becomes less likely, with consequent disastrous results for western religious dogmas. In particular:

"What exactly can "the chosen people" mean in a universe rich in diverse planetary life? Or again, since evolving species are always imperfect, how can the waywardness of the intelligent life on an abundance of inhabited planets be cured by a once-for-all sacrifice by the Son of God?"

Dr Hemmings concludes that Christians struggle with traditional dogmas, while a view of the cosmos opens up before us with which the traditional dogmas are not a good fit, and the only way out is to

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10. John Wesley, Collected Works, Epworth Press, London, 1932, Vol x, p 345

abandon the traditional dogmas.<sup>11</sup>

There is reason to believe, however, that the Christian Faith is more pliable than Dr Hemmings believes. In other words, the abandonment of traditional dogmas is not the only strategy open to us. The history of the Christian tradition shows that dogmas can be changed in order to accommodate new knowledge. When Copernicus and Kepler and Galileo shifted the earth from the centre of the Universe; and when Charles Darwin demonstrated that the early chapters of Genesis could not be a literal account of the Origin of the Species there were those who were ready to sound the death-knell of the Christian Faith. Yet, in addition to those who reacted by retreating into the ghetto of both scriptural and doctrinal fundamentalism there were those who accepted the challenge of re-interpreting the faith in line with modern knowledge.

Such a re-interpretation is now necessary with regard to the Theology of Other Faiths, and especially, finally, with regard to Christ and the Church.

##### 5. Christ and the Church

The Church is pre-occupied with upholding the exclusive claims of Christ in a world which contains a multitude of religious communities. Many of its efforts to do this are seen as defensive and even offensive by the other religious communities. The final question which needs some re-thinking therefore has to do with the uniqueness of Christ. Does it depend upon the exclusion or inclusion

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11. James Hemmings, article "When our theologians get lost in space", The Guardian, 28 May 1990



of other truths?

From one point of view, the uniqueness of Christ is not a problem at all to those of other faiths. Thus, one writer puts it:

"The uniqueness of Christ is not the problem; the problem is with the church which wants to preserve or guard the exclusiveness of the Christian faith by setting limits to God's activity. The spirit of God works in the world, it does not confine itself to a particular race, colour or religion."<sup>12</sup>

Our survey of the long history of the Christian thinking about Other Faiths has shown that for most of that time Christianity has not really had to think about the problem. Most people of other faiths have been safely confined in other continents half a world away. All that has changed and the Church has to come to terms with the possibility that there are other bearers of God's truth in the world; that Christ is unique, but inclusively unique rather than exclusively; that there are other saving ways to God besides the Christian way; that the Christian Bible is not just a text-book of salvation and not the only scripture in the world.

When the task of the Church is put in those terms it is not difficult to see why there is a reluctance to grasp the nettle, for does it not seem as if the demand is for the Church to think itself out of existence? Or, at least, to think itself out of its self-appointed

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12. Cf V Sherada, article "Towards a Theology of Openness", Expository Times, Vol 92, No 3, December 1980, pp 86-87

primary role in relation to the salvation of the world?

In which case, it is time to think again about the nature of salvation. In the Christian tradition, it has usually been understood in terms of rescue and deliverance from the world of powers and darkness. Increasingly, however, it becomes clear that there is only one human predicament and that is how to become and remain human in the midst of powers and darkness and confronting the growing knowledge of the universe given to us by scientists. It seems unlikely that Christianity is the only way in which to do that. It also seems unlikely that Christianity is the only way to go for all possible forms of life in all possible worlds. We need the resources of all the religious traditions, some of which may yet have to be discovered, and a commitment to a theology of dialogue, for that is also a commitment to openness:

"The primary aim of dialogue is not so much to arrive at a point of convergence and compromise (though it is possible at times) but to allow oneself to develop a sense of openness to the "new" that one may meet in the course of a dialogue".

### Conclusion

The whole of this work has been concerned with the inadequacy of Christian theology in so far as it concerns the faith of those who do not belong to the Christian tradition. "The Scandal of Particularity" has been seen as an attitude by which millions of men and women have been put outside of the Kingdom of God because they do not share Christian beliefs. In most cases, those who have been consigned to religious oblivion in this way have never even heard of

Christ and therefore cannot be blamed in any way for their state of unfaith.

Reflected upon this way, the Christian Theology of Other Faiths is seen to be not only inadequate, but a scandal in itself. Yet, our survey of the tradition has shown that there is the possibility of another approach, which might be summed up in this way:

- \* All men and women are God's creatures and the objects of his love and concern.

- \* God has revealed something of himself to all men and women, in every age and in every culture; not all have received the same, but they have received something.

- \* The revelation in Jesus of Nazareth is therefore not the only way to God, although it may be, for some, the best way.

- \* The Christian Church is therefore not the only bearer of salvation, although it is definitely one of the bearers, since many have found their salvation within its walls.

- \* None of the other faiths is an exclusive bearer of salvation, but they are definitely bearers of it because many have found their salvation within those traditions.

- \* There are, indeed, many paths to God, and to particularise one as the only way is a scandal.

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